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# A HOUSE DIVIDED
# AGAINST ITSELF

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# A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF

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BY

## MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN,' 'EFFIE OGILVIE,' ETC.

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# A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF

## CHAPTER I

THE day was warm, and there was no shade; out of the olive woods which they had left behind, and where all was soft coolness and freshness, they had emerged into a piece of road widened and perfected by recent improvements till it was as shelterless as a broad street. High walls on one side clothed with the green clinging trails of the mesembryanthemum, with palm-trees towering above, but throwing no shadow below; on the other a low house or two, and more garden walls, leading in a broad curve to the little old walled town, its campanile rising up over the clustered roofs, in which was their home. They had fifteen minutes or more of dazzling sunshine before them ere they could reach any point of shelter.

Ten minutes, or even five, would have been enough for Frances. She could have run along, had she been alone, as like a bird as any human creature could be, being so light and swift and young. But it was very different with her father. He walked but slowly at the best of times; and in the face of the sun at noon, what was to be expected of him? It was part of the strange contrariety of fate, which was against him in whatever he attempted, small or great, that it should be just here, in this broad, open, unavoidable path, that he encountered one of those parties which always made him wroth, and which usually he managed to keep clear of with such dexterity—an English family from one of the hotels.

Tourists from the hotels are always objectionable to residents in a place. Even when the residents are themselves strangers—perhaps, indeed, all the more from that fact—the chance visitors who come to stare and gape at those scenes which the others have appropriated and taken possession of, are insufferable. Mr. Waring had lived in the old town of Bordighera for a great number of years. He had seen the Marina and the line of hotels on the beach created, and he had watched the travellers arriving to take possession of them —the sick people, and the people who were not sick. He had denounced the invasion unceasingly, and with vehemence; he had never consented to it. The Italians about might be complacent, thinking of the enrichment of the neighbourhood, and of what was good for trade, as these prosaic people do; but the English colonist on the Punto could not put up with it. And to be met here, on his return from his walk, by an unblushing band about whom there could be no mistake, was very hard to bear. He had to walk along exposed to the fire of all their unabashed and curious glances, to walk slowly, to miss none, from that of the stout mother to that of the slim governess. In the rear of the party came the papa, a portly Saxon, of the class which, if comparisons could be thought of in so broad and general a sentiment, Mr. Waring disliked worst of all—a big man, a rosy man, a fat man, in large easy morning clothes, with a big white umbrella over his head. This last member of the family came at some distance behind the rest. He did not like the sun, though he had been persuaded to leave England in search of it. He was very warm, moist, and in a state of general relaxation, his tidy necktie coming loose, his gloves only half on, his waistcoat partially unbuttoned. It was March, when no doubt a good genuine east wind was blowing at home. At that moment this traveller almost regretted the east wind.

The Warings were going up-hill towards their abode: the slope was gentle enough, yet it added to the slowness of Mr. Waring's pace. All the English party had stared at him, as is the habit of English parties; and indeed he and his daughter were not unworthy of a stare. But all these gazes came with a cumulation of curiosity to widen the stare of the last comer, who had, besides, twenty or thirty yards of vacancy in which the indignant resident was fully exposed to his view. Little

Frances, who was English enough to stare too, though in a gentlewomanly way, saw a change gradually come, as he gazed, over the face of the stranger. His eyebrows rose up bushy and arched with surprise; his eyelids puckered with the intentness of his stare; his lips dropped apart. Then he came suddenly to a standstill, and gasped forth the word 'WARING!' in tones of surprise to which capital letters can give but faint expression.

Mr. Waring, struck by this exclamation as by a bullet, paused too, as with something of that inclination to turn round which is said to be produced by a sudden hit. He put up his hand momentarily, as if to pull down his broad-brimmed hat over his brows. But in the end he did neither. He stood and faced the stranger with angry energy. 'Well?' he said.

'Dear me! who could have thought of seeing you here? Let me call my wife. She will be delighted. Mary! Why, I thought you had gone to the East. I thought you had disappeared altogether. And so did everybody. And what a long time it is, to be sure. You look as if you had forgotten me.'

'I have,' said the other, with a supercilious gaze, perusing the large figure from top to toe.

'Oh come, Waring! Why—Mannering; you can't have forgotten Mannering, a fellow that stuck by you all through. Dear, how it brings up everything, seeing you again! Why, it must be a dozen years ago. And what have you been doing all this time? Wandering over the face of the earth, I suppose, in all sorts of out-of-the-way places, since nobody has ever fallen in with you before.'

'I am something of an invalid,' said Waring. 'I fear I cannot stand in the sun to answer so many questions. And my movements are of no importance to any one but myself.'

'Don't be so misanthropical,' said the stranger in his large round voice. 'You always had a turn that way. And I don't wonder if you are soured—any fellow would be soured. Won't you say a word to Mary? She's looking back, wondering with all her might what new acquaintance I've found out here, never thinking it's an old friend. Hillo, Mary! What's the matter? Don't you want to see her? Why, man alive, don't be so bitter! She and I have always stuck up for you;

through thick and thin, we've stuck up for you. Eh! can't stand any longer? Well, it is hot, isn't it? There's no variety in this confounded climate. Come to the hotel then,—the Victoria, down there.'

Waring had passed his interrogator, and was already at some distance, while the other, breathless, called after him. He ended, affronted, by another discharge of musketry, which hit the fugitive in the rear. 'I suppose,' the indiscreet inquirer demanded, breathlessly, 'that's the little girl?'

Frances had followed with great but silent curiosity this strange conversation. She had not interposed in any way, but she had stood close by her father's side, drinking in every word with keen ears and eyes. She had heard and seen many strange things, but never an encounter like this; and her eagerness to know what it meant was great; but she dared not linger a moment after her father's rapid movement of the hand, and the longer stride than usual, which was all the increase of speed he was capable of. As she had stood still by his side without a question, she now went on, very much as if she had been a delicate little piece of machinery of which he had touched the spring. That was not at all the character of Frances Waring; but to judge by her movements while at her father's side, an outside observer might have thought so. She had never offered any resistance to any impulse from him in her whole life; indeed it would have seemed to her an impossibility to do so. But these impulses concerned the outside of her life only. She went along by his side with the movement of a swift creature restrained to the pace of a very slow one, but making neither protest nor remark. And neither did she ask any explanation, though she cast many a stolen glance at him as they pursued their way. And for his part, he said nothing. The heat of the sun, the annoyance of being thus interrupted, were enough to account for that.

This broad bit of sunny road which lay between them and the shelter of their home had been made by one of those too progressive municipalities, thirsting for English visitors and tourists in general, who fill with hatred and horror the old residents in Italy; and after it followed a succession of stony stairs more congenial to the locality, by which, under old archways and through narrow alleys, you got at last to the wider centre of the town, a broad stony piazza, under the shadow of the Bell Tower, the characteristic campanile which was the landmark of the place. Except on one side of the piazza, all here was in grateful shade. Waring's stern face softened a little when he came into these cool and almost deserted streets: here and there was a woman at a doorway, an old man in the deep shadow of an open shop or booth unguarded by any window, two or three girls filling their pitchers at the well, but no intrusive tourists or passengers of any kind to break the noonday stillness. The pair went slowly through the little town, and emerged by another old gateway, on the farther side, where the blue Mediterranean, with all its wonderful shades of colour, and line after line of headland cutting down into those ethereal tints, stretched out before them, ending in the haze of the Ligurian mountains. The scene was enough to take away the breath of one unaccustomed to that blaze of wonderful light, and all the delightful accidents of those purple hills. But this pair were too familiarly acquainted with every line to make any pause. They turned round the sunny height from the gateway, and entered by a deep small door sunk in the wall, which stood high like a great rampart rising from the Punto. This was the outer wall of the palace of the lord of the town, still called *the* Palazzo at Bordighera. Every large house is a palace in Italy; but the pretensions of this were well founded. The little door by which they entered had been an opening of modern and peaceful times, the state entrance being through a great doorway and court on the inner side. The deep outer wall was pierced by windows, only at the height of the second storey on the sea side, so that the great marble stair up which Waring toiled slowly was very long and fatiguing, as if it led to a mountain-top. He reached his rooms breathless, and going in through ante-chamber and corridor, threw himself into the depths of a large but upright chair. There were no signs of luxury about. It was not one of those hermitages of culture and ease which English recluses make for themselves in the most unlikely places. It was more like a real hermitage; or, to speak more simply, it was like, what it really was, an apartment in an old Italian house, in a rustic castle, furnished and provided as such a place, in the possession of its natural inhabitants, would be.

The Palazzo was subdivided into a number of habitations, of which the apartment of the Englishman was the most important. It was composed of a suite of rooms facing to the sea, and commanding the entire circuit of the sun; for the windows on one side were to the east, and at the other the apartment ended in a large loggia, commanding the west and all the glorious sunsets accomplished there. We Northerners, who have but a limited enjoyment of the sun, show often a strange indifference to him in the sites and situations of our houses; but in Italy it is well known that where the sun does not go the doctor goes, and much more regard is shown to the aspect of the house.

The Warings at the worst of that genial climate had little occasion for fire; they had but to follow the centre of light when he glided out of one room to fling himself more abundantly into another. The Punto is always full in the cheerful rays. It commands everything—air and sea, and the mountains and all their thousand effects of light and shade; and the Palazzo stands boldly out upon this the most prominent point in the landscape, with the houses of the little town withdrawing on a dozen different levels behind. In the warlike days when no point of vantage which a pirate could seize upon was left undefended or assailable, it is probable that there was no loggia from which to watch the western illuminations. But peace has been so long on the Riviera that the loggia too was antique, the parapet crumbling and gray. It opened from a large room, very lofty, and with much faded decoration on the upper walls and roof, which was the *salone* or drawing-room, beyond which was an ante-room, then a sort of library, a dining-room, a succession of bed-chambers; much space, little furniture, sunshine and air unlimited, and a view from every window which it was worth living to be able to look out upon night and day. This, however, at the moment of which we write, was shut out all along the line, the green *persiani* being closed, and nothing open but the loggia, which was still cool and in the shade. The rooms lay in a soft green twilight, cool and fresh; the doors were open from one to another, affording a long vista of picturesque glimpses.

From where Waring had thrown himself down to rest, he looked straight through the apartment, over the faded formality of the ante-room with its large old chairs, which were never moved from their place, across his own library, in which there was a glimmer of vellum binding and old gilding, to the table with its white tablecloth, laid out for breakfast in the eating-room. The quiet soothed him after a while, and perhaps the evident preparations for his meal, the large and rotund flask of Chianti which Domenico was placing on the table, the vision of another figure behind Domenico with a delicate dish of mayonnaise in her hands. He could distinguish that it was a mayonnaise, and his angry spirit calmed down. Noon began to chime from the campanile, and Frances came in without her hat and with the eagerness subdued in her eyes. 'Breakfast is ready, papa,' she said. She had that look of knowing nothing and guessing nothing beyond what lies on the surface, which so many women have.

She was scarcely to be called a woman, not only because of being so young, but of being so small, so slim, so light, with such a tiny figure, that a stronger breeze than usual would, one could not help thinking, blow her away. Her father was very tall, which made her tiny size the more remarkable. She was not beautiful—few people are to the positive degree; but she had the prettiness of youth, of round soft contour, and peach-like skin, and clear eyes. Her hair was light brown, her eyes dark brown, neither very remarkable; her features small and clearly cut, as was her figure, no slovenliness or want of finish about any line. All this pleasing exterior was very simple and easily comprehended, and had but little to do with her, the real Frances, who was not so easy to understand. She had two faces, although there was in her no guile. She had the countenance she now wore, as it were for daily use—a countenance without expression, like a sunny cheerful morning in which there is neither care nor fear—the countenance of a girl calling papa to breakfast, very punctual, determined that nobody should reproach her as being half of a minute late, or having a hair or a ribbon a hair's-breadth out of place. That such a girl should have ever suspected anything, feared anything—except perhaps gently that the mayonnaise was not to papa's taste—was beyond the range of possibilities; or that she should be acquainted with anything in life beyond the simple routine of regular hours and habits, the sweet and gentle bond of the ordinary, which is the best rule of young lives.

Frances Waring had sometimes another face. That profile of hers was not so clearly cut for nothing; nor were her eyes so lucid only to perceive the outside of existence. In her room, during the few minutes she spent there, she had looked at herself in her old-fashioned dim glass, and seen a different creature. But what that was, or how it was, must show itself farther on. She led the way into the dining-room, the trimmest composed little figure, all England embodied—though she scarcely remembered England—in the self-restrained and modest toilet of a little girl accustomed to be cared for by women well instructed in the niceties of feminine costume; and yet she had never had any one to take counsel with except an Italian maid-of-all-work, who loved the brightest primitive colours, as became her race. Frances knew so few English people that she had not even the admiration of surprise at her success. Those she did know took it for granted that she got her pretty sober suits, her simple unelaborate dresses, from some very excellent dressmaker at 'home,' not knowing that she did not know what home was.

Her father followed her, as different a figure as imagination could suggest. He was very tall, very thin, with long legs and stooping shoulders, his hair in limp locks, his shirt-collar open, a velvet coat—looking as entirely adapted to the locality, the conventional right man in the right place, as she was not the conventional woman. A gloomy look, which was habitual to him, a fretful longitudinal pucker in his forehead, the hollow lines of ill health in his cheeks, disguised the fact that he was, or had been, a handsome man; just as his extreme spareness and thinness made it difficult to believe that he had also been a very powerful one. Nor was he at all old, save in the very young eyes of his daughter, to whom forty-five was venerable. He might have been an artist or a poet of a misanthropical turn of mind; though, when a man has chronic asthma, misanthropy is unnecessary to explain his look of pain, and fatigue, and disgust with the outside world. He walked languidly, his shoulders up to his ears, and followed Frances to the table, and sat down with that air of dissatisfaction which takes the comfort out of everything. Frances either was inaccessible to this kind of discomfort, or so accustomed to it that she did not feel it. She sat serenely opposite to him, and talked of indifferent things.

‘Don’t take the mayonnaise, if you don’t like it, papa; there is something else coming that will perhaps be better. Mariuccia does not at all pride herself upon her mayonnaise.’

‘Mariuccia knows very little about it; she has not even the sense to know what she can do best.’ He took a little more of the dish, partly out of contradiction, which was the result which Frances hoped.

‘The lettuce is so crisp and young, that makes it a little better,’ she said, with the air of a connoisseur.

‘A little better is not the word; it is very good,’ he said fretfully; then added with a slight sigh, ‘Everything is better for being young.’

‘Except people, I know. Why does young mean good with vegetables and everything else, and silly only when it is applied to people?—though it can’t be helped, I know.’

‘That is one of your metaphysical questions,’ he said, with a slight softening of his tone. ‘Perhaps because of human jealousy. We all like to discredit what we haven’t got, and most people you see are no longer young.’

‘Oh, do you think so, papa? I think there are more young people than old people.’

‘I suppose you are right, Fan; but they don’t count for so much, in the way of opinion at least. What has called forth these sage remarks?’

‘Only the lettuce,’ she said, with a laugh. Then, after a pause, ‘For instance, there were six or seven children in the party we met to-day, and only two parents.’

‘There are seldom more than two parents, my dear.’

She had not looked up when she made this careless little speech, and yet there was a purpose in it, and a good deal of keen observation through her drooped eyelashes. She received his reply with a little laugh. ‘I did not mean that, papa; but that six or seven are a great deal more than two, which of course you will laugh at me for saying. I suppose they were all English?’

‘I suppose so. The father—if he was the father—certainly was English.’

'And you knew him, papa?'

'He knew me, which is a different thing.'

Then there was a little pause. The conversation between the father and daughter was apt to run in broken periods. He very seldom originated anything. When she found a subject upon which she could interest him, he would reply, to a certain limit, and then the talk would drop. He was himself a very silent man, requiring no outlet of conversation; and when he refused to be interested, it was a task too hard for Frances to lead him into speech. She on her side was full of a thousand unsatisfied curiosities, which for the most part were buried in her own bosom. In the meantime Domenico made the circle of the table with the new dish, and his step and a question or two from his master were all the remarks that accompanied the meal. Mr. Waring was something of a *gourmet*, but at the same time he was very temperate—a conjunction which is favourable to fine eating. His table was delicately furnished with dishes almost infinitesimal in quantity, but superlative in quality; and he ate his dainty light repast with gravity and slowly, as a man performs what he feels to be one of the most important functions of his life.

'Tell Mariuccia that a few drops from a fresh lemon would have improved this *ragoût*—but a very fresh lemon.'

'Yes, Excellency, *freschissimo*,' said Domenico, with solemnity.

In the household generally, nothing was so important as the second breakfast, except, indeed, the dinner, which was the climax of the day. The gravity of all concerned, the little solemn movement round the white-covered table in the still soft shade of the atmosphere, with those green *persiani* shutting out all the sunshine, and the brown old walls, bare of any decoration, throwing up the group, made a curious picture. The walls were quite bare, the floor brown and polished, with only a square of carpet round the table; but the roof and cornices were gilt and painted with tarnished gilding and half-obliterated pictures. Opposite to Frances was a blurred figure of a cherub with a finger on his lip. She looked up at this faint image as she had done a hundred times, and was silent. He seemed to command the group, hovering over it like a little tutelary god.

## CHAPTER II

THE Warings had been settled at Bordighera almost as long as Frances could remember. She had known no other way of living than that which could be carried on under the painted roofs in the Palazzo, nor any other domestic management than that of Domenico and Mariuccia. She herself had been brought up by the latter, who had taught her to knit stockings and to make lace of a coarse kind, and also how to spare and save, and watch every detail of the *spese*—the weekly or daily accounts—with an anxious eye. Beyond this, Frances had received very little education: her father had taught her fitfully to read and write after a sort; and he had taught her to draw, for which she had a little faculty—that is to say, she had made little sketches of all the points of view round about, which, if they were not very great in art, amused her, and made her feel that there was something she could do. Indeed, so far as doing went, she had a good deal of knowledge. She could mend very neatly—so neatly, that her darn or her patch was almost an ornament. She was indeed neat in everything, by instinct, without being taught. The consequence was, that her life was very full of occupation, and her time never hung heavy on her hands. At eighteen, indeed, it may be doubted whether time ever does hang heavy on a girl's hands. It is when ten years or so of additional life have passed over her head, bringing her no more important occupations than those which are pleasant and appropriate to early youth, that she begins to feel her disabilities; but fortunately, that is a period of existence with which at the present moment we have nothing to do.

Her father, who was not fifty yet, had been a young man when he came to this strange seclusion. Why he should have chosen Bordighera, no one had taken the trouble to inquire. He came when it was a little town on the spur of the hill, without either hotels or tourists, or at least very few of these articles—like many other little towns which are perched on little platforms among the olive-woods all over that lovely country. The place had commended itself to him because it was so completely out of the way. And then it was very cheap, simple, and primitive. He was not, however, by any means a primitive-minded man; and when he took Domenico and Mariuccia into his service, it was for a year or two an interest in his life to train them to everything that was the reverse of their own natural primitive ways. Mariuccia had a little native instinct for cookery such as is not unusual among the Latin races, and which her master trained into all the sophistications of a *cordon bleu.* And Domenico had that lively desire to serve his padrone 'hand and foot,' as English servants say, and do everything for him, which comes natural to an amiable Italian eager to please. Both of them had been encouraged and trained to carry out these inclinations. Mr. Waring was difficult to please. He wanted attendance continually. He would not tolerate a speck of dust anywhere, or any carelessness of service; but otherwise he was not a bad master. He left them many independences, which suited them, and never objected to that appropriation to themselves of his house as theirs, and assertion of themselves as an important part of the family, which is the natural result of a long service. Frances grew up accordingly in franker intimacy with the honest couple than is usual in English households. There was nothing they would not have done for the signorina—starve for her, scrape and pinch for her, die for her if need had been; and in the meantime, while there was no need for service more heroic, correct her, and improve her mind, and set her faults before her with simplicity. Her faults were small, it is true, but zealous Love did not omit to find many out.

Mr. Waring painted a little, and was disposed to call himself an artist; and he read a great deal, or was supposed to do so, in the library, which formed one of the set of rooms, among the old books in vellum, which took a great deal of reading. A little old public library existing in another little town farther up among the hills, gave him an excuse, if it was not anything more, for a great deal of what he called work. There were some manuscripts and a number of old editions laid up in this curious little hermitage of learning, from which the few people who knew him believed he was going some day to compile or collect something of importance. The people who knew him were very few. An old clergyman, who had been a colonial chaplain all his life, and now 'took the service' in the bare little room which served as an English church, was the chief of his acquaintances. This gentleman had an old wife and a middle-aged daughter, who furnished something like society for Frances. Another associate was an old Indian officer, much battered by wounds, liver, and disappointment, who, systematically neglected by the authorities (as he thought), and finding himself a nobody in the home to which he had looked forward for so many years, had retired in disgust, and built himself a little house, surrounded with palms, which reminded him of India, and full in the rays of the sun, which kept off his neuralgia. He, too, had a wife, whose constant correspondence with her numerous children occupied her mind and thoughts, and who liked Frances because she never tired of hearing stories of those absent sons and daughters. They saw a good deal of each other, these three resident families, and reminded each other from time to time that there was such a thing as society.

In summer they disappeared—sometimes to places higher up among the hills, sometimes to Switzerland or the Tyrol, sometimes 'home.' They all said home, though neither the Durants nor the Gaunts knew much of England, and though they could never say enough in disparagement of its gray skies and cold winds. But the Warings never went 'home.' Frances, who was entirely without knowledge or associations with her native country, used the word from time to time because she heard Tasie Durant or Mrs. Gaunt do so; but her father never spoke of England, nor of any possible return, nor of any district in England as that to which he belonged. It escaped him at times that he had seen something of society a dozen or fifteen years before this date; but otherwise, nothing was known about his past life. It was not a thing that was much discussed, for the intercourse in which he lived with his neighbours was not intimate, nor was there any particular reason why he should enter upon his own history; but now and then it would be remarked by one or another that nobody knew anything of his antecedents. 'What's your county, Waring?' General Gaunt had once asked; and the other had answered with a languid smile, 'I have no county,' without the least attempt to explain. The old general, in spite of himself, had apologised, he did not know why; but still no information was given. And Waring did not look like a man who had no county. His thin long figure had an aristocratic air. He knew about horses and dogs and country-gentleman sort of subjects. It was impossible that he should turn out to be a shopkeeper's son, or a *bourgeois* of any kind. However, as has been said, the English residents did not give themselves much trouble about the matter. There was not enough of them to get up a little parochial society, like that which flourishes in so many English colonies, gossiping with the best, and forging anew for themselves those chains of a small community which everybody pretends to hate.

In the afternoon of the day on which the encounter recorded in the previous chapter had taken place, Frances sat in the loggia alone at her work. She was busy with her drawing—a very elaborate study of palm-trees, which she was making from a cluster of those trees which were visible from where she sat. A loggia is something more than a balcony; it is like a room with the outer wall or walls taken away. This one was as large as the big *salone* out of which it opened, and had therefore room for changes of position as the sun changed. Though it faced the west, there was always a shady corner at one end or the other. It was the favourite place in which Frances carried on all her occupations—where her father came to watch the sunset—where she had tea, with that instinct of English habit and tradition which she possessed without knowing how. Mr. Waring did not much care for her tea, except now and then in a fitful way; and Mariuccia thought it medicine. But it pleased Frances to have the little table set out with two or three old china cups which did not match, and a small silver teapot, which was one of the very few articles of value in the house. Very rarely, not once in a month, had she any occasion for these cups; but yet, such a chance did occur at long intervals; and in the meantime, with a pleasure not much less infantine but much more wistful than that with which she had played at having a tea-party seven or eight years before, she set out her little table now.

She was seated with her drawing materials on one table and the tea on another, in the stillness of the afternoon, looking out upon the mountains and the sea. No; she was doing nothing of the sort. She was looking with all her might at the clump of palm-trees within the garden of the villa, which lay low down at her feet between her and the sunset. She was not indifferent to the sunset. She had an admiration, which even the humblest art-training quickens, for the long range of coast, with its innumerable ridges running down from the sky to the sea, in every variety of gnarled edge, and gentle slope, and precipice; and for the amazing blue of the water, with its ribbon-edge of paler colours, and the deep royal purple of the broad surface, and the white sails thrown up against it, and the white foam that turned up the edges of every little wave. But in the meantime she was not thinking of them, nor of the infinitely varied lines of the mountains, or the specks of towns, each with its campanile shining in the sun, which gave character to the scene; but of the palms on which her attention was fixed, and which, however beautiful they sound, or even look, are apt to get very spiky in a drawing, and so often will not 'come' at all. She was full of fervour in her work, which had got to such a pitch of impossibility that her lips were dry and wide apart from the strain of excitement with which she struggled with her subject, when the bell tinkled where it hung outside upon the stairs, sending a little jar through all the Palazzo, where bells were very uncommon; and presently Tasie Durant, pushing open the door of the *salone*, with a breathless little 'Permesso?' came out upon the loggia in her usual state of haste, and with half a dozen small books tumbling out of her hand.

'Never mind, dear; they are only books for the Sunday school. Don't you know we had twelve last Sunday? Twelve! —think!—when I have thought it quite large and extensive to have five. I never was more pleased. I am getting up a little library for them like they have at home. It is so nice to have everything like they have at home.'

'Like what?' said Frances, though she had no education.

'Like they have—well, if you are so particular, the same as they have at home. There were three of one family—think! Not little nobodies, but ladies and gentlemen. It is so nice of people not just poor people, people of education, to send their children to the Sunday school.'

'New people?' said Frances.

'Yes; tourists, I suppose. You all scoff at the tourists; but I think it is very good for the place, and so pleasant for us to see a new face from time to time. Why should they all go to Mentone? Mentone is so towny, quite a big place. And papa says that in his time Nice was everything, and that nobody had ever heard of Mentone.'

'Who are the new people, Tasie?' Frances asked.

'They are a large family—that is all I know; not likely to settle, more's the pity. Oh no. Quite *well* people, not even a delicate child,' said Miss Durant regretfully; 'and such a nice domestic family, always walking about together. Father and mother, and governess and six children. They must be very well off, too, or they could not travel like that, such a lot of them, and nurses—and I think I heard, a courier too.' This, Miss Durant said in a tone of some emotion; for the place, as has been said, was just beginning to be known, and the people who came as yet were but pioneers.

'I have seen them. I wonder who they are. My father——' said Frances; and then stopped, and held her head on one side, to contemplate the effect of the last touches on her drawing; but this was in reality because it suddenly occurred to her that to publish her father's acquaintance with the stranger might be unwise.

'Your father?' said Tasie. 'Did he take any notice of them? I thought he never took any notice of tourists. Haven't you done those palms yet? What a long time you are taking over them! Do you think you have got the colour quite right on those stems? Nothing is so difficult to do as palms, though they look so easy—except olives: olives are impossible. But what were you going to say about your father? Papa says he has not seen Mr. Waring for ages. When will you come up to see us?'

'It was only last Saturday, Tasie.'

'——Week,' said Tasie. 'Oh yes, I assure you; for I put it down in my diary: Saturday week. You can't quite tell how time goes, when you don't come to church. Without Sunday, all the days are alike. I wondered that you were not at church last Sunday, Frances, and so did mamma.'

'Why was it? I forget. I had a headache, I think. I never like to stay away. But I went to church here in the village instead.'

'O Frances, I wonder your papa lets you do that! It is much better when you have a headache to stay at home. I am sure I don't want to be intolerant, but what good can it do you going there? You can't understand a word.'

'Yes, indeed I do—many words. Mariuccia has shown me all the places; and it is good to see the people all saying their prayers. They are a great deal more in earnest than the people down at the Marina, where it would be just as natural to dance as to pray.'

'Ah, dance!' said Tasie, with a little sigh. 'You know there is never anything of that kind here. I suppose you never was at a dance in your life—unless it is in summer, when you go away?'

'I have never been at a dance in my life. I have seen a ballet, that is all.'

'O Frances, please don't talk of anything so wicked! A ballet! that is very different from nice people dancing—from dancing one's own self with a nice partner. However, as we never do dance here, I can't see why you should say that about our church. It is a pity, to be sure, that we have no right church; but it is a lovely room, and quite suitable. If you would only practise the harmonium a little, so as to take the music when I am away. I never can afford to have a headache on Sunday,' Miss Durant added, in an injured tone.

'But, Tasie, how could I take the harmonium, when I don't even know how to play?'

'I have offered to teach you, till I am tired, Frances. I wonder what your papa thinks, if he calls it reasonable to leave you without any accomplishments? You can draw a little, it is true; but you can't bring out your sketches in the drawing-room of an evening, to amuse people; and you can always play——'

'When you *can* play.'

'Yes, of course that is what I mean—when you can play. It has quite vexed me often to think how little trouble is taken about you; for you can't always be young, so young as you are now. And suppose some time you should have to go home—to your friends, you know?'

Frances raised her head from her drawing and looked her companion in the face. 'I don't think we have any—friends,' she said.

'Oh, my dear, that must be nonsense!' cried Tasie. 'I confess I have never heard your papa talk of any. He never says "my brother," or "my sister," or "my brother-in-law," as other people do—but then he is such a very quiet man; and you must have somebody—cousins at least—you must have cousins; nobody is without somebody,' Miss Durant said.

'Well, I suppose we must have cousins,' said Frances. 'I had not thought of it. But I don't see that it matters much; for if my cousins are surprised that I can't play, it will not hurt them—they can't be considered responsible for me, you know.'

Tasie looked at her with the look of one who would say much if she could—wistfully and kindly, yet with something of the air of mingled importance and reluctance with which the bearer of ill news hesitates before opening his budget. She had indeed no actual ill news to tell, only the burden of that fact of which everybody felt Frances should be warned—that her father was looking more delicate than ever, and that his 'friends' ought to know. She would have liked to speak, and yet she had not courage to do so. The girl's calm consent that probably she must have cousins was too much for any one's patience. She never seemed to think that one day she might have to be dependent on these cousins; she never seemed to think—— But after all, it was Mr. Waring's fault. It was not poor Frances that was to blame.

'You know how often I have said to you that you ought to play—you ought to be able to play. Supposing you have not any gift for it, still you might be able to do a little. You could so easily get an old piano, and I should like to teach you. It would not be a task at all. I should like it. I do so wish you would begin. Drawing and languages depend a great deal upon your own taste and upon your opportunities; but every lady ought to play.'

Tasie (or Anastasia, but that name was too long for anybody's patience) was a great deal older than Frances—so much older as to justify the hyperbole that she might be her mother;

but of this fact she herself was not aware. It may seem absurd to say so, but yet it was true. She knew, of course, how old she was, and how young Frances was; but her faculties were of the kind which do not perceive differences. Tasie herself was just as she had been at Frances' age—the girl at home, the young lady of the house. She had the same sort of occupations: to arrange the flowers; to play the harmonium in the little colonial chapel; to look after the little exotic Sunday school; to take care of papa's surplice; to play a little in the evenings when they 'had people with them;' to do fancy-work, and look out for such amusements as were going. It would be cruel to say how long this condition of young-ladyhood had lasted, especially as Tasie was a very good girl—kind, and friendly, and simple-hearted, and thinking no evil.

Some women chafe at the condition which keeps them still girls when they are no longer girls; but Miss Durant had never taken it into her consideration. She had a little more of the housekeeping to do, since mamma had become so delicate; and she had a great deal to fill up her time, and no leisure to think or inquire into her own position. It was her position, and therefore the best position which any girl could have. She had the satisfaction of being of the greatest use to her parents, which is the thing of all others which a good child would naturally desire. She talked to Frances without any notion of an immeasurable distance between them, from the same level, though with a feeling that the girl, by reason of having had no mother, poor thing, was lamentably backward in many ways, and sadly blind, though that was natural, to the hazard of her own position. What would become of her if Mr. Waring died? Tasie would sometimes grow quite anxious about this, declaring that she could not sleep for thinking of it. If there were relations—as of course there must be—she felt that they would think Frances sadly deficient. To teach her to play was the only practical way in which she could show her desire to benefit the girl, who, she thought, might accept the suggestion from a girl like herself, when she might not have done so from a more authoritative voice.

Frances on her part accepted the suggestion with placidity, and replied that she would think of it, and ask her father;

and perhaps if she had time—— But she did not really at all intend to learn music of Tasie. She had no desire to know just as much as Tasie did, whose accomplishments, as well as her age and her condition altogether, were quite evident and clear to the young creature, whose eyes possessed the unbiassed and distinct vision of youth. She appraised Miss Durant exactly at her real value, as the young so constantly do, even when they are quite submissive to the little conventional fables of life, and never think of asserting their superior knowledge; but the conversation was suggestive, and beguiled her mind into many new channels of thought. The cousins unknown—should she ever be brought into intercourse with them, and enter perhaps a kind of other world through their means—would they think it strange that she knew so little, and could not play the piano? Who were they? These thoughts circled vaguely in her mind through all Tasie's talk, and kept flitting out and in of her brain, even when she removed to the tea-table and poured out some tea. Tasie always admired the cups. She cried, 'This is a new one, Frances. Oh, how lucky you are! What pretty bits you have picked up!' with all the ardour of a collector. And then she began to talk of the old Savona pots, which were to be had so cheap, quite cheap, but which, she heard at home, were so much thought of.

Frances did not pay much attention to the discourse about the Savona pots; she went on with her thoughts about the cousins, and when Miss Durant went away, gave herself up entirely to those speculations. What sort of people would they be? Where would they live? And then there recurred to her mind the meeting of the morning, and what the stranger said who knew her father. It was almost the first time she had ever seen him meet any one whom he knew, except the acquaintances of recent times, with whom she had made acquaintance, as he did. But the stranger of the morning evidently knew about him in a period unknown to Frances. She had made a slight and cautious attempt to find out something about him at breakfast, but it had not been successful. She wondered whether she would have courage to ask her father now in so many words who he was and what he meant.

## CHAPTER III

As it turned out, Frances had not the courage. Mr. Waring strolled into the loggia shortly after Miss Durant had left her. He smiled when he heard of her visit, and asked what news she had brought. Tasie was the recognised channel for news, and seldom appeared without leaving some little story behind her.

'I don't think she had any news to-day, except that there had been a great many at the Sunday school last Sunday. Fancy, papa, twelve children! She is quite excited about it.'

'That is a triumph,' said Mr. Waring, with a laugh. He stretched out his long limbs from the low basket-chair in which he had placed himself. He had relaxed a little altogether from the tension of the morning, feeling himself secure and at his ease in his own house, where no one could intrude upon him or call up ghosts of the past. The air was beyond expression sweet and tranquillising, the sun going down in a mist of glory behind the endless peaks and ridges that stretched away towards the west, the sea lapping the shore with a soft cadence that was more imagined than heard on the heights of the Punto, but yet added another harmony to the scene. Near at hand a faint wind rustled the long leaves of the palm-trees, and the pale olive woods lent a softness to the landscape, tempering its radiance. Such a scene fills up the weary mind, and has the blessed quality of arresting thought. It was good for the breathing too—or at least so this invalid thought—and he was more amiable than usual, with no harshness in voice or temper to introduce a discord. 'I am glad she was pleased,' he said. 'Tasie is a good girl, though not perhaps so much of a girl as she thinks. Why she goes in for a Sunday school where none is wanted, I can't tell; but anyhow, I am glad she is pleased. Where did they come from, the twelve children? Poor little beggars, how sick of it they must have been!'

'A number of them belonged to that English family, papa——'

'I suppose they must all belong to English families,' he said calmly; 'the natives are not such fools.'

'But, papa, I mean—the people we met—the people you knew.'

He made no reply for a few minutes, and then he said calmly, 'What an ass the man must be, not only to travel with children, but to send them to poor Tasie's Sunday school! You must do me the justice, Fan, to acknowledge that I never attempted to treat you in that way.'

'No; but, papa—perhaps the gentleman is a very religious man.'

'And you don't think I am? Well, perhaps I laid myself open to such a retort.'

'O papa!' Frances cried, with tears starting to her eyes, 'you know I could not mean that.'

'If you take religion as meaning a life by rule, which is its true meaning, you were right enough, my dear. That is what I never could do. It might have been better for me if I had been more capable of it. It is always better to put one's self in harmony with received notions and the prejudices of society. Tasie would not have her Sunday school but for that. It is the right thing. I think you have a leaning towards the right thing, my little girl, yourself.'

'I don't like to be particular, papa, if that is what you mean.'

'Always keep to that,' her father said, with a smile. And then he opened the book which he had been holding all this time in his hand. Such a thing had happened, when Frances was in high spirits and very courageous, as that she had pursued him even into his book; but it was a very rare exercise of valour, and to-day she shrank from it. If she only had the courage! But she had not the courage. She had given up her drawing, for the sun no longer shone on the group of palms. She had no book, and indeed at any time was not much given to reading, except when a happy chance threw a novel into her hands. She watched the sun go down by imperceptible degrees, yet not slowly, behind the mountains. When he had quite disappeared, the landscape changed too; the air, as the Italians say, grew brown; a little momentary chill breathed out of the sky. It is always depressing to a solitary watcher when this change takes place.

Frances was not apt to be depressed, but for the moment she felt lonely and dull, and a great sense of monotony took hold upon her. It was like this every night; it would be like this, so far as she knew, every night to come, until perhaps she grew old, like Tasie, without becoming aware that she had ceased to be a girl. It was not a cheering prospect. And when there is any darkness or mystery surrounding one's life, these are just the circumstances to quicken curiosity, and turn it into something graver, into an anxious desire to know. Frances did not know positively that there was a mystery. She had no reason to think there was, she said to herself. Her father preferred to live easily on the Riviera, instead of living in a way that would trouble him at home. Perhaps the gentleman they had met was a bore, and that was why Mr. Waring avoided all mention of him. He frequently thought people were bores, with whom Frances was very well satisfied. Why should she think any more of it? Oh, how she wished she had the courage to ask plainly and boldly, Who are we? Where do we come from? Have we any friends? But she had not the courage. She looked towards him, and trembled, imagining within herself what would be the consequence if she interrupted his reading, plucked him out of the quietude of the hour and of his book, and demanded an explanation—when very likely there was no explanation! when, in all probability, everything was quite simple, if she only knew.

The evening passed as evenings generally did pass in the Palazzo. Mr. Waring talked a little at dinner quite pleasantly, and smoked a cigarette in the loggia afterwards in great good-humour, telling Frances various little stories of people he had known. This was a sign of high satisfaction on his part, and very agreeable to her, and no doubt he was entirely unaware of the perplexity in her mind and the questions she was so desirous of asking. The air was peculiarly soft that evening, and he sat in the loggia till the young moon set, with an overcoat on his shoulders and a rug on his knees, sometimes talking, sometimes silent — in either way a very agreeable companion. Frances had never been cooped up in streets, or exposed to the chill of an English spring; so she had not that keen sense of contrast which doubles the enjoyment of a heavenly evening in such a heavenly locality. It was all quite natural, common, and everyday to her; but no one could be indifferent to the sheen of the young moon, to the soft circling of the darkness, and the reflections on the sea. It was all very lovely, and yet there was something wanting. What was wanting? She thought it was knowledge, acquaintance with her own position, and relief from this strange bewildering sensation of being cut off from the race altogether, which had risen within her mind so quickly and with so little cause.

But many beside Frances have felt the wistful call for happiness more complete, which comes in the soft darkening of a summer night; and probably it was not explanation, but something else, more common to human nature, that she wanted. The voices of the peaceful people outside, the old men and women who came out to sit on the benches upon the Punto, or on the stone seat under the wall of the Palazzo, and compare their experiences, and enjoy the cool of the evening, sounded pleasantly from below. There was a softened din of children playing, and now and then a sudden rush of voices, when the young men who were strolling about got excited in conversation, and stopped short in their walk for the delivery of some sentence more emphatic than the rest; and the mothers chattered over their babies, cooing and laughing. The babies should have been in bed, Frances said to herself, half laughing, half crying, in a sort of tender anger with them all for being so familiar and so much at home. They were entirely at home where they were; they knew everybody, and were known from father to son, and from mother to daughter, all about them. They did not call a distant and unknown country by that sweet name, nor was there one among them who had any doubt as to where he or she was born. This thought made Frances sigh, and then made her smile. After all, if that was all! And then she saw that Domenico had brought the lamp into the *salone*, and that it was time to go indoors.

Next morning she went out between the early coffee and the mid-day breakfast to do some little household business, on which, in consideration that she was English and not bound by the laws that are so hard and fast with Italian girls, Mariuccia consented to let her go alone. It was very seldom that Mr. Waring went out, or indeed was visible, at that hour, the expedition of the former day being very exceptional. Frances went down to the shops to do her little commissions for Mariuccia. She even investigated the Savona pots of which Tasie had spoken. In her circumstances, it was scarcely possible not to be more or less of a collector. There is nobody in these regions who does not go about with eyes open to anything there may be to ‘pick up.’ And after this she walked back through the olive woods, by those distracting little terraces which lead the stranger so constantly out of his way, but are quite simple to those who are to the manner born—until she reached once more the broad piece of unshadowed road which leads up to the old town. At the spot at which she and her father had met the English family yesterday, she made a momentary pause, recalling all the circumstances of the meeting, and what the stranger had said—‘A fellow that stuck by you all through.’ All through what? she asked herself. As she paused to make this little question, to which there was no response, she heard a sound of voices coming from the upper side of the wood, where the slopes rose high into more and more olive gardens. ‘Don’t hurry along so; I’m coming,’ some one said. Frances looked up, and her heart jumped into her mouth as she perceived that it was once more the English family whom she was about to meet on the same spot.

The father was in advance this time, and he was hurrying down, she thought, with the intention of addressing her. What should she do? She knew very well what her father would have wished her to do;—but probably for that very reason a contradictory impulse arose in her. Without doubt, she wanted to know what this man knew and could tell her. Not that she would ask him anything; she was too proud for that. To betray that she was not acquainted with her father’s affairs, that she had to go to a stranger for information, was a thing of which she was incapable. But if he wished to speak to her—to send, perhaps, some message to her father? Frances quieted her conscience in this way. She was very anxious, excited by the sense that there was something to find out; and if it was anything her father would not approve, why, then she could shut it up in her own breast and never let him know it to trouble him. And it was right at her age that she should know. All these sophistries hurried through her mind more rapidly than lightning during the moment in which she paused hesitating, and gave the large Englishman, overwhelmed with the heat, and hurrying down the steep path with his white umbrella over his head, time to make up to her. He was rather out of breath, for though he had been coming down hill, and not going up, the way was steep.

'Miss Waring, Miss Waring!' he cried as he approached, 'how is your father? I want to ask for your father,' taking off his straw hat and exposing his flushed countenance under the shadow of the green-lined umbrella, which enhanced all its ruddy tints. Then, as he came within reach of her, he added hastily, 'I am so glad I have met you. How is he? for he did not give me any address.'

'Papa is quite well, thank you,' said Frances, with the habitual response of a child.

'Quite well? Oh, that is a great deal more than I expected to hear. He was not quite well yesterday, I am sure. He is dreadfully changed. It was a sort of guesswork my recognising him at all. He used to be such a powerful-made man. Is it pulmonary? I suspect it must be something of the kind, he has so wasted away.'

'Pulmonary? Indeed I don't know. He has a little asthma sometimes. And of course he is very thin,' said Frances; 'but that does not mean anything; he is quite well.'

The stranger shook his head. He had taken the opportunity to wipe it with a large white handkerchief, and had made his bald forehead look redder than ever. 'I shouldn't like to alarm you,' he said—'I wouldn't, for all the world; but I hope you have trustworthy advice? These Italian doctors, they are not much to be trusted. You should get a real good English doctor to come and have a look at him.'

'Oh, indeed, it is only asthma; he is well enough, quite well, not anything the matter with him,' Frances protested. The large stranger stood and smiled compassionately upon her, still shaking his head.

'Mary,' he said—'here, my dear! This is Miss Waring. She says her father is quite well, poor thing. I am telling her I am so very glad we have met her, for Waring did not leave me any address.'

'How do you do, my dear?' said the stout lady—not much less red than her husband—who had also hurried down the steep path to meet Frances. 'And your father is quite well? I am so glad. We thought him looking rather—thin; not so strong as he used to look.'

'But then,' added her husband, 'it is such a long time since we have seen him, and he never was very stout. I hope, if you will pardon me for asking, that things have been smoothed down between him and the rest of the family? When I say "smoothed down," I mean set on a better footing—more friendly, more harmonious. I am very glad I have seen you, to inquire privately; for one never knows how far to go with a man of his—well—peculiar temper.'

'Don't say that, George. You must not think, my dear, that Mr. Mannering means anything that is not quite nice, and friendly, and respectful to your papa. It is only out of kindness that he asks. Your poor papa has been much tried. I am sure he has always had my sympathy, and my husband's too. Mr. Mannering only means that he hopes things are more comfortable between your father and—— Which is so much to be desired for everybody's sake.'

The poor girl stood and stared at them with large, round, widely-opening eyes, with the wondering stare of a child. There had been a little half-mischievous, half-anxious longing in her mind to find out what these strangers knew; but now she came to herself suddenly, and felt as a traveller feels who all at once pulls himself up on the edge of a precipice. What was this pitfall which she had nearly stumbled into, this rent from the past which was so great and so complete that she had never heard of it, never guessed it? Fright seized upon her, and dismay, and, what probably stood her in more stead for the moment, a stinging sensation of wounded pride, which brought the colour burning to her cheeks. Must she let these people find out that she knew nothing, at her age—that her father had never confided in her at all—that she could not even form an idea what they were talking about? She had pleased herself with the possibility of some little easy discovery—of finding out, perhaps, something about the cousins whom it seemed certain, according to Tasie, every one must possess, whether they were aware of it or not—some little revelation of origin and connections such as could do nobody any harm.

But when she woke up suddenly to find herself as it were upon the edge of a chasm which had split her father's life in two, the young creature trembled. She was frightened beyond measure by this unexpected contingency; she dared not listen to another word.

'Oh,' she said, with a quiver in her voice, 'I am afraid I have no time to stop and talk. Papa will be waiting for his breakfast. I will tell him you—asked for him.'

'Give him our love,' said the lady. 'Indeed, George, she is quite right; we must hurry too, or we shall be too late for the *table d'hôte*.'

'But I have not got the address,' said the husband. Frances made a little curtsey, as she had been taught, and waved her hand as she hurried away. He thought that she had not understood him. 'Where do you live?' he called after her as she hastened along. She pointed towards the height of the little town, and alarmed for she knew not what—lest he should follow her, lest he should call something after her which she ought not to hear—fled along towards the steep ascent. She could hear the voices behind her slightly elevated talking to each other, and then the sound of the children rattling down the stony course of the higher road, and the quick question and answer as they rejoined their parents. Then gradually everything relapsed into silence as the party disappeared. When she heard the voices no longer, Frances began to regret that she had been so hasty. She paused for a moment, and looked back; but already the family were almost out of sight, the solid figures which led the procession indistinguishable from the little ones who straggled behind. Whether it might have been well or ill to take advantage of the chance, it was now over. She arrived at the Palazzo out of breath, and found Domenico at the door, looking out anxiously for her. 'The signorina is late,' he said, very gravely; 'the padrone has almost had to wait for his breakfast.' Domenico was quite original, and did not know that such a terrible possibility had threatened any illustrious personage before.

## CHAPTER IV

It was natural that this occurrence should take a great hold of the girl's mind. It was not the first time that she had speculated concerning their life. A life which one has always lived, indeed, the conditions of which have been familiar and inevitable since childhood, is not a matter which awakens questions in the mind. However extraordinary its conditions may be, they are natural—they are life to the young soul which has had no choice in the matter. Still there are curiosities which will arise. General Gaunt foamed at the mouth when he talked of the way in which he had been treated by the people 'at home;' but still he went 'home' in the summer as a matter of course. And as for the Durants, it was a subject of the fondest consideration with them when they could afford themselves that greatest of delights. They all talked about the cold, the fogs, the pleasure of getting back to the sunshine when they returned; but this made no difference in the fact that to go home was their thought all the year, and the most salient point in their lives. 'Why do we never go home?' Frances had often asked herself. And both these families, and all the people to whom she had ever talked, the strangers who went and came, and those whom they met in the rambles which the Warings, too, were forced to take in the hot weather, when the mistral was blowing—talked continually of their county, of their parish, of their village, of where they lived, and where they had been born. But on these points Mr. Waring never said a word. And whereas Mrs. Gaunt could talk of nothing but her family, who were scattered all over the world, and the Durants met people they knew at every turn, the Warings knew nobody, had no relations, no house at home, and apparently had been born nowhere in particular, as Frances sometimes said to herself with more annoyance than humour. Sometimes she wondered whether she had ever had a mother.

These thoughts, indeed, occurred but fitfully now and then, when some incident brought more forcibly than usual under her notice the difference between herself and others. She did not brood over them, her life being quite pleasant and comfortable to herself, and no necessity laid upon her to elucidate its dimnesses. But yet they came across her mind from time to time. She had not been brought face to face with any old friend of her father's, that she could remember, until now. She had never heard any question raised about his past life. And yet no doubt he had a past life, like every other man, and there was something in it—something, she could not guess what, which had made him unlike other men.

Frances had a great deal of self-command. She did not betray her agitation to her father; she did not ask him any questions; she told him about the greengrocer and the fisherman, these two important agents in the life of the Riviera, and of what she had seen in the Marina, even the Savona pots; but she did not disturb his meal and his digestion by any reference to the English strangers. She postponed until she had time to think of it, all reference to this second meeting. She had by instinct made no reply to the question about where she lived; but she knew that there would be no difficulty in discovering that, and that her father might be subject at any moment to invasion by this old acquaintance, whom he had evidently no desire to see. What should she do? The whole matter wanted thought. Whether she should ask him what to do; whether she should take it upon herself; whether she should disclose to him her new-born curiosity and anxiety, or conceal them in her own bosom; whether she should tell him frankly what she felt—that she was worthy to be trusted, and that it was the right of his only child to be prepared for all emergencies, and to be acquainted with her family and her antecedents, if not with his,—all these were things to be thought over. Surely she had a right, if any one had a right. But she would not stand upon that.

She sat by herself all day and thought, putting forward all the arguments on either side. If there was, as there might be, something wrong in that past—something guilty, which might make her look on her father with different eyes, he had a right to be silent, and she no right, none whatever, to insist upon such a revelation. And what end would it serve? If she had relations or a family from whom she had been separated, would not the revelation fill her with eager desire to know them, and open a fountain of dissatisfaction and discontent in her life if she were not permitted to do so? Would she not chafe at the banishment if she found out that somewhere there was a home, that she had 'belongings' like all the rest of the world? These were little feeble barriers which she set up against the strong tide of consciousness in her that she was to be trusted, that she ought to know. Whatever it was, and however she might bear it, was it not true that she ought to know? She was not a fool or a child. Frances knew that her eighteen years had brought more experience, more sense to her, than Tasie's forty; that she was capable of understanding, capable of keeping a secret—and was it not her own secret, the explanation of the enigma of her life as well as of his?

This course of reflection went on in her mind until the evening, and it was somewhat quickened by a little conversation which she had in the afternoon with the servants. Domenico was going out. It was early in the afternoon, the moment of leisure, when one meal with all its responsibilities was over, and the second great event of the day, the dinner, not yet imminent. It was the hour when Mariuccia sat in the anteroom and did her sewing, her mending, her knitting—whatever was wanted. This was a large and lofty room—not very light, with a great window looking out only into the court of the Palazzo—in which stood a long table and a few tall chairs. The smaller ante-room, from which the long suite of rooms opened on either side, communicated with this, as did also the corridor, which ran all the length of the house, and the kitchen and its appendages on the other side. There is always abundance of space of this kind in every old Italian house. Here Mariuccia established herself whenever she was free to leave her cooking and her kitchen-work. She was a comely middle-aged woman, with a dark gown, a white apron, a little shawl on her shoulders, large earrings, and a gold cross at her neck, which was a little more visible than is common with Englishwomen of her class. Her hair was crisp and curly, and never had been covered with anything, save, when she went to church, a shawl or veil; and Mariuccia's olive complexion and ruddy tint feared no encounter of the sun. Domenico was tall, and spare, and brown—a grave man with little jest in him; but his wife was always ready to laugh. He came out hat in hand while Frances stood by the table inspecting Mariuccia's work. 'I am going out,' he said; 'and this is the hour when the English gentlefolks pay visits. See that thou remember what the padrone said.'

'What did the padrone say?' cried Frances, pricking up her ears.

'Signorina, it was to my wife I was speaking,' said Domenico.

'That I understand; but I wish to know as well. Was papa expecting a visit? What did he say?'

'The padrone himself will tell the signorina,' said Domenico, 'all that is intended for her. Some things are for the servants, some for the family; Mariuccia knows what I mean.'

'You are an ass, 'Menico,' said his wife calmly. 'Why shouldn't the dear child know? It is nothing to be concerned about, my soul—only that the padrone does not receive, and again that he does not receive, and that he never receives. I must repeat this till the Ave Maria, if necessary, till the strangers accept it and go away.'

'Are these special orders?' said Frances, 'or has it always been so? I don't think that it has always been so.'

Domenico had gone out while his wife was speaking, with a half-threatening and wholly disapproving look, as if he would not involve himself in the responsibility which Mariuccia had taken upon her.

'*Carina*, don't trouble yourself about it. It has always been so in the spirit, if not in the letter,' said Mariuccia. 'Figure to yourself Domenico or me letting in any one, any one that chose to come, to disturb the signor padrone! That would be impossible. It appears, however, that there is some one down there in the hotels to whom the padrone has a great objection, greater than to the others. It is no secret, nothing to trouble you. But 'Menico, though he is a good man, is not very wise. *Che!* you know that as well as I.'

'And what will you do if this gentleman will not pay any attention—if he comes in all the same? The English don't understand what it means when you say you do not receive. You must say he is not in; he has gone out; he is not at home.'

'*Che! che! che!*' cried Mariuccia; 'little deceiver! But that would be a lie.'

Frances shook her head. 'Yes; I suppose so,' she said, with a troubled look; 'but if you don't say it, the Englishman will come in all the same.'

'He will come in, then, over my body,' cried Mariuccia with a cheerful laugh, standing square and solid against the door.

This gave the last impulse to Frances' thoughts. She could not go on with her study of the palms. She sat with her pencil in her hand, and the colour growing dry, thinking all the afternoon through. It was very certain, then, that her father would not expose himself to another meeting with the strangers who called themselves his friends—innocent people who would not harm any one, Frances was sure. They were tourists—that was evident; and they might be vulgar—that was possible. But she was sure that there was no harm in them. It could only be that her father was resolute to shut out his past, and let no one know what had been. This gave her an additional impulse, instead of discouragement. If it was so serious, and he so determined, then surely there must be something that she, his only child, ought to know. She waited till the evening with a gradually growing excitement; but not until after dinner, after the soothing cigarette, which he puffed so slowly and luxuriously in the loggia, did she venture to speak. Then the day was over. It could not put him out, or spoil his appetite, or risk his digestion. To be sure, it might interfere with his sleep; but after consideration, Frances did not think that a very serious matter, probably because she had never known what it was to pass a wakeful night. She began, however, with the greatest caution and care.

'Papa,' she said, 'I want to consult you about something Tasie was saying.'

'Ah! that must be something very serious, no doubt.'

'Not serious, perhaps; but——she wants to teach me to play.'

'To play! What? Croquet? or whist, perhaps? I have always heard she was excellent at both.'

'These are games, papa,' said Frances, with a touch of severity. 'She means the piano, which is very different.'

'Ah!' said Mr. Waring, taking the cigarette from his lips and sending a larger puff of smoke into the dim air; 'very different indeed, Frances. It is anything but a game to hear Miss Tasie play.'

'She says,' continued Frances, with a certain constriction in her throat, 'that every lady is expected to play—to play a little at least, even if she has not much taste for it. She thinks when we go home—that all our relations will be so surprised——'

She stopped, having no breath to go further, and watched as well as she could, through the dimness and through the mist of agitation in her own eyes, her father's face. He made no sign; he did not disturb even the easy balance of his foot, stretched out along the pavement. After another pause, he said in the same indifferent tone, 'As we are not going home, and as you have no relations in particular, I don't think your friend's argument is very strong. Do you?'

'O papa, I don't want indeed to be inquisitive or trouble you, but I should like to know!'

'What?' he said, with the same composure. 'If I think that a lady, whether she has any musical taste or not, ought to play? Well, that is a very simple question. I don't, whatever Miss Tasie may say.'

'It is not that,' Frances said, regaining a little control of herself. 'I said I did not know of any relations we had. But Tasie said there must be cousins; we must have cousins—everybody has cousins. That is true, is it not?'

'In most cases, certainly,' Mr. Waring said; 'and a great nuisance too.'

'I don't think it would be a nuisance to have people about one's own age, belonging to one—not strangers—people who were interested in you, to whom you could say anything. Brothers and sisters, that would be the best; but cousins—I think, papa, cousins would be very nice.'

'I will tell you, if you like, of one cousin you have,' her father said.

The heart of Frances swelled as if it would leap out of her breast. She put her hands together, turning full round upon him in an attitude of supplication and delight. 'O papa!' she cried with enthusiasm, breathless for his next word.

'Certainly, if you wish it, Frances. He is in reality your first-cousin. He is fifty. He is a great sufferer from gout.

He has lived so well in the early part of his life that he is condemned to slops now, and spends most of his time in an easy-chair. He has the temper of a demon, and swears at everybody that comes near him. He is very red in the face, very bleared about the eyes, very——'

'O papa!' she cried, in a very different tone. She was so much disappointed that the sudden downfall had almost a physical effect upon her, as if she had fallen from a height. Her father laughed softly while she gathered all her strength together to regain command of herself, and the laugh had a jarring effect upon her nerves, of which she had never been conscious till now.

'I don't suppose that he would care much whether you played the piano or not; or that you would care much, my dear, what he thought.'

'For all that, papa,' said Frances, recovering herself, 'it is a little interesting to know there is somebody, even if he is not at all what one thought. Where does he live, and what is his name? That will give me one little landmark in England, where there is none now.'

'Not a very reasonable satisfaction,' said her father lazily, but without any other reply. 'In my life I have always found relations a nuisance. Happy are they who have none; and next best is to cast them off and do without them. As a matter of fact, it is every one for himself in this world.'

Frances was silenced, though not convinced. She looked with some anxiety at the outline of her father's spare and lengthy figure laid out in the basket-chair, one foot moving slightly, which was a habit he had, the whole extended in perfect rest and calm. He was not angry, he was not disturbed. The questions which she had put with so much mental perturbation had not affected him at all. She felt that she might dare further without fear.

'When I was out to-day,' she said, faltering a little, 'I met—that gentleman again.'

'Ah!' said Mr. Waring—no more; but he ceased to shake his foot, and turned towards her the merest hair's-breadth, so little that it was impossible to say he had moved, and yet there was a change.

'And the lady,' said Frances, breathless. 'I am sure they wanted to be kind. They asked me a great many questions.'

He gave a faint laugh, but it was not without a little quiver in it. 'What a good thing that you could not answer them!' he said.

'Do you think so, papa? I was rather unhappy. It looked as if you could not trust me. I should have been ashamed to say I did not know; which is the truth—for I know nothing, not so much as where I was born!' cried the girl. 'It is very humiliating, when you are asked about your own father, to say you don't know. So I said it was time for breakfast, and you would be waiting; and ran away.'

'The best thing you could have done, my dear. Discretion in a woman or a girl is always the better part of valour. I think you got out of it very cleverly,' Mr. Waring said.

And that was all. He did not seem to think another word was needed. He did not even rise and go away, as Frances had known him to do when the conversation was not to his mind. She could not see his face, but his attitude was unchanged. He had recovered his calm, if there had ever been any disturbance of it. But as for Frances, her heart was thumping against her breast, her pulses beating in her ears, her lips parched and dry. 'I wish,' she cried, 'oh, I wish you would tell me something, papa! Do you think I would talk of things you don't want talked about? I am not a child any longer; and I am not silly, as perhaps you think.'

'On the contrary, my dear,' said Mr. Waring, 'I think you are often very sensible.'

'Papa! oh, how can you say that, how can you say such things—and then leave me as if I were a baby, knowing nothing!'

'My dear,' he said (with the sound of a smile in his voice, she thought to herself), 'you are very hard to please. Must not I say that you are sensible? I think it is the highest compliment I can pay you.'

'O papa!' Disappointment, and mortification, and the keen sense of being fooled, which is so miserable to the young, took her very breath away. The exasperation with which we discover that not only is no explanation, no confidence to be given us, but the very occasion for it ignored, and our anxiety baffled by a smile—a mortification to which women are so often subject—flooded her being. She had hard ado not to burst into angry tears, not to betray the sense of cruelty and injustice which overwhelmed her; but who could have seen any injustice or cruelty in the gentleness of his tone, his soft reply? Frances subdued herself as best she could in her dark corner of the loggia, glad at least that he could not see the spasm that passed over her, the acute misery and irritation of her spirit. It would be strange if he did not divine something of what was going on within her: but he took no notice. He began in the same tone, as if one theme was quite as important as the other, to remark upon the unusual heaviness of the clouds which hid the moon. 'If we were in England I should say there was a storm brewing,' he said. 'Even here, I think we shall have some rain. Don't you feel that little *creep* in the air, something sinister, as if there was a bad angel about? And Domenico, I see, has brought the lamp. I vote we go in.'

'Are there any bad angels?' she cried, to give her impatience vent.

He had risen up, and stood swaying indolently from one foot to the other. 'Bad angels? Oh yes,' he said; 'abundance; very different from devils, who are honest—like the fiends in the pictures, unmistakable. The others, you know, deceive. Don't you remember?—

"How there looked him in the face
  An angel beautiful and bright;
And how he knew it was a fiend,
  That miserable knight."'

He turned and went into the *salone*, repeating these words in an undertone to himself. But there was in his face none of the bitterness or horror with which they must have been said by one who had ever in his own person made that discovery. He was quite calm, meditative, marking with a slight intonation and movement of his head the cadence of the poetry.

Frances stayed behind in the darkness. She had not the practice which we acquire in later life; she could not hide the excitement which was still coursing through her veins. She went to the corner of the loggia which was nearest the sea, and caught in her face the rush of the rising breeze, which flung at her the first drops of the coming rain. A storm on that soft coast is a welcome break in the monotony of the clear skies and unchanging calm. After a while her father called to her that the rain was coming in, that the windows must be shut; and she hurried in, brushing by Domenico, who had come to close everything up, and who looked at her reproachfully as she rushed past him. She came behind her father's chair and leaned over to kiss him. 'I have got a little wet, and I think I had better go to bed,' she said.

'Yes, surely, if you wish it, my dear,' said Mr. Waring. Something moist had touched his forehead, which was too warm to be rain. He waited politely till she had gone before he wiped it off. It was the edge of a tear, hot, miserable, full of anger as well as pain, which had made that mark upon his high white forehead. It made him pause for a minute or two in his reading. 'Poor little girl!' he said, with a sigh. Perhaps he was not so insensible as he seemed.

## CHAPTER V

It is a common impression that happiness and unhappiness are permanent states of mind, and that for long tracts of our lives we are under the continuous sway of one or other of these conditions. But this is almost always a mistake, save in the case of grief, which is perhaps the only emotion which is beyond the reach of the momentary lightenings and alleviations and perpetual vicissitudes of life. Death, and the pangs of separation from those we love, are permanent, at least for their time; but in everything else there is an ebb and flow which keeps the heart alive. When Frances Waring told the story of this period of her life, she represented herself unconsciously as having been oppressed by the mystery that overshadowed her, and as having lost all the ease of her young life prematurely in a sudden encounter with shadows unsuspected before. But as a matter of fact this was not the case. She had a bad night—that is, she cried herself asleep; but once over the boundary which divides our waking thoughts from the visions of the night, she knew no more till the sun came in and woke her to a very cheerful morning. It is true that care made several partially successful assaults upon her that day and for several days after. But as everything went on quite calmly and peacefully, the impression wore off. The English family found out, as was inevitable, where Mr. Waring lived, without any difficulty; and first the father came, then the mother, and finally the pair together, to call. Frances, to whom a breach of decorum or civility was pain unspeakable, sat trembling and ashamed in the deepest corner of the loggia, while these kind strangers encountered Mariuccia at the door. The scene, as a matter of fact, was rather comic than tragic, for neither the visitors nor the guardian of the house possessed any language but their own; and Mr. and Mrs. Mannering had as little understanding of the statement that Mr. Waring did not 'receive' as Frances had expected.

'But he is in—*è in casa—è* IN?' said the worthy Englishman. 'Then, my dear, of course it is only a mistake. When he knows who we are—when he has our names——'

'*Non riceve oggi,*' said Mariuccia, setting her sturdy breadth in the doorway; '*oggi non riceve il signore*' (The master does not receive to-day).

'But he is in?' repeated the bewildered good people. They could have understood 'Not at home,' which to Mariuccia would have been simply a lie—with which indeed, had need been, or could it have done the padrone any good, she would have burdened her conscience as lightly as any one. But why, when it was not in the least necessary?

Thus they played their little game at cross-purposes, while Frances sat, hot and red with shame, in her corner, sensible to the bottom of her heart of the discourtesy, the unkindness, of turning them from the door. They were her father's friends; they claimed to have 'stuck by him through thick and thin;' they were people who knew about him, and all that he belonged to, and the conditions of his former life; and yet they were turned from his door!

She did not venture to go out again for some days, except in the evening, when she knew that all the strangers were at the inevitable *table d'hôte;* and it was with a sigh of relief, yet disappointment, that she heard they had gone away. Yes, at last they did go away, angry, no doubt, thinking her father a churl, and she herself an ignorant rustic, who knew nothing about good manners. Of course this was what they must think. Frances heard those words, '*Non riceve oggi*,' even in her dreams. She saw in imagination the astonished faces of the visitors. 'But he will receive us, if you will only take in our names;' and then Mariuccia's steady voice repeating the well-known phrase. What must they have thought? That it was an insult—that their old friend scorned and defied them. What else could they suppose?

They departed, however, and Frances got over it: and everything went on as before; her father was just as usual—a sphinx, indeed, more and more hopelessly wrapped up in silence and mystery, but so natural and easy and kind in his uncommunicativeness, with so little appearance of repression or concealment about him, that it was almost impossible to retain any feeling of injury or displeasure. Love is cheated every day in this way by offenders much more serious, who can make their dependants happy even while they are ruining them, and beguile the bitterest anxiety into forgetfulness and smiles. It was easy to make Frances forget the sudden access of wonderment and wounded feeling which had seized her, even without any special exertion; time alone and the calm succession of the days were enough for that. She resumed her little picture of the palms, and was very successful—more than usually so. Mr. Waring, who had hitherto praised her little works as he might have praised the sampler of a child, was silenced by this, and took it away with him into his room, and when he brought it back, looked at her with more attention than he had been used to show. 'I think,' he said, 'little Fan, that you must be growing up,' laying his hand upon her head with a smile.

'I am grown up, papa; I am eighteen,' she said.

At which he laughed softly. 'I don't think much of your eighteen; but this shows. I should not wonder, with time and work, if—you mightn't be good enough to exhibit at Mentone—after a while.'

Frances had been looking at him with an expression of almost rapturous expectation. The poor little countenance fell at this, and a quick sting of mortification brought tears to her eyes. The exhibition at Mentone was an exhibition of amateurs. Tasie was in it, and even Mrs. Gaunt, and all the people about who ever spoilt a piece of harmless paper. 'O papa!' she said. Since the failure of her late appeal to him, this was the only formula of reproach which she used.

'Well,' he said, 'are you more ambitious than that, you little thing? Perhaps, by and by, you may be fit even for better things.'

'It is beautiful,' said Mariuccia. 'You see where the light goes, and where it is in the shade. But, *carina*, if you were to copy the face of Domenico, or even mine, that would be more interesting. The palms we can see if we look out of the window; but imagine to yourself that 'Menico might go away, or even might die; and we should not miss him so much if we had his face hung up upon the wall.'

'It is easier to do the trees than to do Domenico,' said Frances; 'they stand still.'

'And so would 'Menico stand still, if it was to please the signorina—he is not very well educated, but he knows enough for that; or I myself, though you will think, perhaps, I am too old to make a pretty picture. But if I had my veil on, and my best earrings, and the coral my mother left me——'

'You look very nice, Mariuccia—I like you as you are; but I am not clever enough to make a portrait.'

Mariuccia cried out with scorn. 'You are clever enough to do whatever you wish to do,' she said. 'The padrone thinks so too, though he will not say it. 'Not clever enough'! *Magari!* too clever is what you mean.'

Frances set up her palms on a little stand of carved wood, and was very well pleased with herself; but that sentiment palls perhaps sooner than any other. It was very agreeable to be praised, and also it was pleasant to feel that she had finished her work successfully. But after a short time it began to be a great subject of regret that the work was done. She did not know what to do next. To make a portrait of Domenico was above her powers. She idled about for the day, and found it uncomfortable. That is the moment in which it is most desirable to have a friend on whom to bestow one's tediousness. She bethought herself that she had not seen Tasie for a week. It was now more than a fortnight since the events detailed in the beginning of this history. Her father, when asked if he would not like a walk, declined. It was too warm, or too cold, or perhaps too dusty, which was very true; and accordingly she set out alone.

Walking down through the Marina, the little tourist town which was rising upon the shore, she saw some parties of travellers arriving, which always had been a little pleasure to her. It was mingled now with a certain excitement. Perhaps some of them, like those who had just gone away, might know all about her, more than she knew herself—what a strange thought it was!—some of those unknown people in their travelling cloaks, which looked so much too warm—people whom she had never seen before, who had not a notion that she was Frances Waring! One of the parties was composed of ladies, surrounded and enveloped, so to speak, by a venerable courier, who swept them and their possessions before him into the hotel. Another was led by a father and mother, not at all unlike the pair who had 'stuck by' Mr. Waring. How strange to imagine that they might not be strangers at all, but people who knew all about her!

In the first group was a girl, who hung back a little from the rest, and looked curiously up at all the houses, as if looking for some one—a tall, fair-haired girl, with a blue veil tied over her hat. She looked tired, but eager, with more interest in her face than any of the others showed. Frances smiled to herself with the half-superiority which a resident is apt to feel: a girl must be very simple indeed, if she thought the houses on the Marina worth looking at, Frances thought. But she did not pause in her quick walk. The Durants lived at the other end of the Marina, in a little villa built upon a terrace over an olive garden—a low house with no particular beauty, but possessing also a loggia turned to the west, the luxury of building on the Riviera. Here the whole family were seated, the old clergyman with a large English newspaper, which he was reading deliberately from end to end; his wife with a work-basket full of articles to mend; and Tasie at the little tea-table, pouring out the tea. Frances was received with a little clamour of satisfaction, for she was a favourite.

'Sit here, my dear.' 'Come this way, close to me, for you know I am getting a little hard of hearing.'

They had always been kind to her, but never, she thought, had she been received with so much cordiality as now.

'Have you come by yourself, Frances? and along the Marina? I think you should make Domenico or his wife walk with you, when you go through the Marina, my dear.'

'Why, Mrs. Durant? I have always done it. Even Mariuccia says it does not matter, as I am an English girl.'

'Ah, that may be true; but English girls are not like American girls. I assure you they are taken a great deal more care of. If you ever go home——'

'And how is your poor father to-day, Frances?' said Mrs. Durant.

'Oh, papa is very well. He is not such a poor father. There is nothing the matter with him. At least, there is nothing *new* the matter with him,' said Frances, with a little impatience.

'No,' said the clergyman, looking up over the top of his spectacles and shaking his head. 'Nothing *new* the matter with him. I believe that.'

'——If you ever go home,' resumed Mrs. Durant; 'and of course some time you will go home——'

'I think very likely I never shall,' said the girl. 'Papa never talks of going home. He says home is here.'

'That is all very well for the present moment, my dear; but I feel sure, for my part, that one time or other it will happen as I say; and then you must not let them suppose you have been a little savage, going about as you liked here.'

'I don't think any one would care much, Mrs. Durant; and I am not going; so you need not be afraid.'

'Your poor father,' Mr. Durant went on in his turn, 'has a great deal of self-command, Frances; he has a great deal of self-control. In some ways, that is an excellent quality, but it may be carried too far. I wish very much he would allow me to come and have a talk with him—not as a clergyman, but just in a friendly way.'

'I am quite sure you may come and talk with him as much as you like,' said Frances, astonished; 'or if you want very much to see him, he will come to you.'

'Oh, I should not take it upon me to ask that—in the meantime,' Mr. Durant said.

The girl stared a little, but asked no further questions. There was something among them which she did not understand—a look of curiosity, an air of meaning more than their words said. The Durants were always a little apt to be didactic, as became a clergyman's family; but Tasie was generally a safe refuge. Frances turned to her with a little sigh of perplexity, hoping to escape further question. 'Was the Sunday school as large last Sunday, Tasie?' she said.

'Oh, Frances, no! Such a disappointment! There were only four! Isn't it a pity? But you see the little Mannerings have all gone away. Such sweet children! and the little one of all has such a voice. They are perhaps coming back for Easter, if they don't stay at Rome; and if so, I think we must put little Herbert in a white surplice—he will look like an angel—and have a real anthem with a soprano solo, for once.'

'I doubt if they will all come back,' said Mr. Durant. 'Mr. Mannering himself indeed, I don't doubt, *on business;* but as for the family, you must not flatter yourself, Tasie.'

'*She* liked the place,' said his wife; 'and very likely she would think it her duty, if anything is to come of it, you know.'

'Be careful,' said the clergyman, with a glance aside, which Frances would have been dull indeed not to have perceived was directed at herself. 'Don't say anything that may be premature.'

Frances was brave in her way. She felt, with a little rising excitement, that her friends were bursting with some piece of knowledge which they were longing to communicate. It roused in her an impatience and reluctance mingled with keen curiosity. She would not hear it, and yet was breathless with impatience to know what it was.

'Mr. Mannering?' she said deliberately—'that was the gentleman that knew papa.'

'You saw him, then?' cried Mrs. Durant. There was something like a faint disappointment in her tone.

'He was one of papa's early friends,' said Frances, with a little emphasis. 'I saw him twice. He and his wife both; they seemed kind people.'

Mr. Durant and his wife looked at each other, and even

Tasie stared over her teacups. 'Oh, very kind people, my dear; I don't think you could do better than have full confidence in them,' Mrs. Durant said.

'And your poor father could not have a truer friend,' said the old clergyman. 'You must tell him I am coming to have a talk with him about it. It was a great revelation, but I hope that everything will turn out for the best.'

Frances grew redder and redder as she sat a mark for all their arrows. What was it that was a 'revelation'? But she would not ask. She began to be angry, and to say to herself that she would put her hands to her ears, that she would listen to nothing.

'Henry!' said Mrs. Durant, 'who is it that is premature now?'

'I am afraid I can't stay,' said Frances, rising quickly from her chair. 'I have something to do for Mariuccia. I only came in because—because I was passing. Never mind, Tasie; I know my way so well; and Mr. Durant wants some more tea.'

'Oh but, Frances, my dear, you really must let me send some one with you. You must not move about in that independent way.'

'And we had a great many things to say to you,' said the old clergyman, keeping her hand in his. 'Are you really in such a hurry? It will be better for yourself to wait a little, and hear something that will be for your good.'

'It cannot be any worse for me to run about to-day than any other day,' said Frances, almost sternly; 'and whatever there is to hear, won't to-morrow do just as well? I think it is a little funny of you all to speak to me so; but now I must go.'

She was so rapid in her movements that she was gone before Tasie could extricate herself from the somewhat crazy little table. And then they all three looked at each other and shook their heads. 'Do you think she can know?' 'Can she have known it all the time?' 'Has Waring told her, or was it Mannering?' they said to each other.

Frances could not hear their mutual questions, but something very like the purport of them got into her agitated brain. She felt sure they were wondering whether she knew

—what? this revelation, this something which they had found out. Nothing would make her submit to hear it from them, she said to herself. But the moment was come when she could not be put off any longer. She would go to her father, and she would not rest until she was informed what it was.

She hastened along, avoiding the Marina, which had amused her on her way, hurrying from terrace to terrace of the olive groves. Her heart was beating fast, and her rapid pace made it faster. But as she thought of her father's unperturbed looks, the calm with which he had received her eager questions, and the very small likelihood that anything she could say about the hints of the Durants would move him, her pace and her excitement both decreased. She went more slowly, less hopefully, back to the Palazzo. It was all very well to say that she must know. But what if he would not tell her? What if he received her questions as he had received them before? The circumstances were not changed, nor was he changed because the Durants knew something, she did not know what. Oh, what a poor piece of friendship was that, that betrayed a friend's secret to his neighbours! She did not know, she could not so much as form a guess, what the secret was. But little or great, his friend should have kept it. She said this to herself bitterly, when the chill probabilities of the case began to make themselves felt. It was harder to think that the Durants knew, than to be kept in darkness herself.

She went in at last very soberly, with the intention of telling her father all that had passed, if perhaps that of itself might be an inducement to him to have confidence in her. It was not a pleasant mission. Her steps had become very sober as she went up the long marble stair. Mariuccia met her with a little cry. Had she not met the padrone? He had gone out down through the olive woods to meet her and fetch her home. It was a brief reprieve. In the evening after dinner was the time when he was most accessible. Frances, with a thrill of mingled relief and disappointment, retired to her room to make her little toilet. She had an hour or two at least before her ere it would be necessary to speak.

## CHAPTER VI

WHEN one has made up one's mind to reopen a painful subject after dinner, the preliminary meal is not usually a very pleasant one; nor, with the tremor of preparation in one's mind, is one likely to make a satisfactory dinner. Frances could not talk about anything. She could not eat; her mind was absorbed in what was coming. It seemed to her that she must speak: and yet how gladly would she have escaped from or postponed the explanation! Explanation! Possibly he would only smile and baffle her as he had done before; or perhaps be angry, which would be better. Anything would be better than that indifference.

She went out to the loggia when dinner was over, trembling with the sensation of suspense. It was still not dark, and the night was clear with the young moon already shining, so that between the retiring day and the light of the night it was almost as clear as it had been two hours before. Frances sat down, shivering a little, though not with cold. Usually her father accompanied or immediately followed her, but by some perversity he did not do so to-night. She seated herself in her usual place, and waited, listening for every sound—that is, for sounds of one kind—his slow step coming along the polished floor, here soft and muffled over a piece of carpet, there loud upon the *parquet*. But for some time, during which she rose into a state of feverish expectation, there was no such sound.

It was nearly half an hour, according to her calculation, probably not half so much by common computation of time, when one or two doors were opened and shut quickly and a sound of voices met her ear—not sounds, however, which had any but a partial interest for her, for they did not indicate his approach. After a while there followed the sound of a footstep, but it was not Mr. Waring's; it was not Domenico's subdued tread, nor the measured march of Mariuccia. It was light, quick, and somewhat uncertain. Frances was half disappointed, half relieved. Some one was coming, but not her father. It would be impossible to speak to him to-night. The relief was uppermost; she felt it through her whole being. Not to-night; and no one can ever tell what to-morrow may bring forth. She looked up no longer with anxiety, but curiosity, as the door opened. It opened quickly; some one looked out, as if to see what was beyond, then, with a slight exclamation of satisfaction, stepped out upon the loggia into the partial light.

Frances rose up quickly, with the curious sensation of acting over something which she had rehearsed before, she did not know where or how. It was the girl whom she had remarked on the Marina as having just arrived who now stood looking about her curiously, with her travelling-cloak fastened only at the throat, her gauze veil thrown up about her hat. This new-comer came in quickly, not with the timidity of a stranger. She came out into the centre of the loggia, where the light fell fully around her, and showed her tall slight figure, the fair hair clustering in her neck, a certain languid grace of movement, which her energetic entrance curiously belied. Frances waited for some form of apology or self-introduction, prepared to be very civil, and feeling in reality pleased and almost grateful for the interruption.

But the young lady made no explanation. She put her hands up to her throat and loosed her cloak with a little sigh of relief. She undid the veil from her hat. 'Thank heaven, I have got here at last, free of those people!' she said, putting herself *sans façon* into Mr. Waring's chair, and laying her hat upon the little table. Then she looked up at the astonished girl, who stood looking on.

'Are you Frances?' she said; but the question was put in an almost indifferent tone.

'Yes; I am Frances. But I don't know——' Frances was civil to the bottom of her soul, polite, incapable of hurting any one's feelings. She could not say anything disagreeable; she could not demand brutally, Who are you? and what do you want here?

'I thought so,' said the stranger; 'and, oddly enough, I saw you this afternoon, and wondered if it could be you. You are a little like mamma.—I am Constance, of course,' she added, looking up with a half-smile. 'We ought to kiss each other, I suppose, though we can't care much about each other, can we?—Where is papa?'

Frances had no breath to speak; she could not say a word. She looked at the new-comer with a gasp. Who was she? And who was papa? Was it some strange mistake which had brought her here? But then the question, 'Are you Frances?' showed that it could not be a mistake.

'I beg your pardon,' she said; 'I don't understand. This is—Mr. Waring's. You are looking for—your father?'

'Yes, yes,' cried the other impatiently, 'I know. You can't imagine I should have come here and taken possession if I had not made sure first! You are well enough known in this little place. There was no trouble about it.—And the house looks nice, and this must be a fine view when there is light to see it by.—But where is papa? They told me he was always to be found at this hour.'

Frances felt the blood ebb to her very finger-points, and then rush back like a great flood upon her heart. She scarcely knew where she was standing or what she was saying in her great bewilderment. 'Do you mean—*my* father?' she said.

The other girl answered with a laugh: 'You are very particular. I mean our father, if you prefer it. Your father—my father. What does it matter?—Where is he? Why isn't he here? It seems he must introduce us to each other. I did not think of any such formality. I thought you would have taken me for granted,' she said.

Frances stood thunderstruck, gazing, listening, as if eyes and ears alike fooled her. She did not seem to know the meaning of the words. They could not, she said to herself, mean what they seemed to mean—it was impossible. There must be some wonderful, altogether unspeakable blunder. 'I don't understand,' she said again, in a piteous tone. 'It must be some mistake.'

The other girl fixed her eyes upon her in the waning light. She had not paid so much attention to Frances at first as to the new place and scene. She looked at her now with the air of weighing her in some unseen balance and finding her wanting, with impatience and half contempt. 'I thought you would have been glad to see me,' she said; 'but the world seems just the same in one place as another. Because I am in distress at home you don't want me here.'

Then Frances felt herself goaded, galled into the matter-of-fact question, 'Who are you?' though she felt that she would not believe the answer she received.

'Who am I? Don't you know who I am? Who should I be but Con? Constance Waring, your sister?—Where,' she cried, springing to her feet and stamping one of them upon the ground—'where, *where* is papa?'

The door opened again behind her softly, and Mr. Waring with his slow step came out. 'Did I hear some one calling for me?' he said.—'Frances, it is not you, surely, that are quarrelling with your visitor?—I beg the lady's pardon; I cannot see who it is.'

The stranger turned upon him with impatience in her tone. 'It was I who called,' she said. 'I thought you were sure to be here. Papa, I have always heard that you were kind—a kind man, they all said; that was why I came, thinking—— I am Constance!' she added after a pause, drawing herself up and facing him with something of his own gesture and attitude. She was tall, not much less than he was; very unlike little Frances. Her slight figure seemed to draw out as she raised her head and looked at him. She was not a suppliant. Her whole air was one of indignation that she should be subjected to a moment's doubt.

'Constance!' said Mr. Waring. The daylight was gone outside; the moon had got behind a fleecy white cloud; behind those two figures there was a gleam of light from within, Domenico having brought in the lamp into the drawing-room. He stepped backward, opening the glass door. 'Come in,' he said, 'to the light.'

Frances came last, with a great commotion in her heart, but very still externally. She felt herself to have sunk into quite a subordinate place. The other two, they were the chief figures. She had now no explanation to ask, no questions to put, though she had a thousand; but everything else was thrown into the background, everything was inferior to this. The chief interest was with the others now.

Constance stepped in after him with a proud freedom of step, the air of one who was mistress of herself and her fate. She went up to the table on which the tall lamp stood, her face on a level with it, fully lighted up by it. She held her hat in her hand, and played with it with a careless yet half-nervous gesture. Her fair hair was short, and clustered in her neck and about her forehead almost like a child's, though she was not like a child. Mr. Waring, looking at her, was more agitated than she. He trembled a little; his eyelids were lifted high over his eyes. Her air was a little defiant; but there was no suspicion, only a little uncertainty in his. He put out his hand to her after a minute's inspection. 'If you are Constance, you are welcome,' he said.

'I don't suppose that you have any doubt I am Constance,' said the girl, flinging her hat on the table and herself into a chair. 'It is a very curious way to receive one, though, after such a long journey—such a tiresome long journey,' she repeated, with a voice into which a querulous tone of exhaustion had come.

Mr. Waring sat down too in the immediate centre of the light. He had not kissed her nor approached her, save by the momentary touch of their hands. It was a curious way to receive a stranger, a daughter. She lay back in her chair as if wearied out, and tears came to her eyes. 'I should not have come, if I had known,' she said, with her lip quivering. 'I am very tired. I put up with everything on the journey, thinking, when I came here—— And I am more a stranger here than anywhere!' She paused, choking with the half-hysterical fit of crying which she would not allow to overcome her. 'She—knows nothing about me!' she cried, with a sharp accent of pain, as if this was the last blow.

Frances, in her bewilderment, did not know what to do or say. She looked at her father, but his face was dumb, and gave her no suggestion; and then she looked at the new-comer, who lay back with her head against the back of the chair, her eyes closed, tears forcing their way through her eyelashes, her slender white throat convulsively struggling with a sob. The mind of Frances had been shaken by a sudden storm of feelings unaccustomed; a throb of something which she did not understand, which was jealousy, though she neither knew nor intended it, had gone through her being. She seemed to see herself cast forth from her easy supremacy, her sway over her father's house, deposed from her principal place. And she was only human. Already she was conscious of a downfall. atelyıstance had drawn the interest towards herself—it was she to whom every eye would turn. The girl stood apart for a moment, with that inevitable movement which has been in the bosom of so many since the well-behaved brother of the Prodigal put it in words, 'Now that this thy son has come.' Constance, so far as Frances knew, was no prodigal; but she was what was almost worse—a stranger, and yet the honours of the house were to be hers. She stood thus, looking on, until the sight of the suppressed sob, of the closed eyes, of the weary, hopeless attitude, were too much for her. Then it came suddenly into her mind, if she is Constance! Frances had not known half an hour before that there was any Constance who had a right to her sympathy in the world. She gave her father another questioning look, but got no reply from his eyes. Whatever had to be done must be done by herself. She went up to the chair in which her sister lay and touched her on the shoulder. 'If we had known you were coming,' she said, 'it would have been different. It is a little your fault not to let us know. I should have gone to meet you; I should have made your room ready. We have nothing ready, because we did not know.'

Constance sat suddenly up in her chair and shook her head, as if to shake off the emotion that had been too much for her. 'How sensible you are!' she said. 'Is that your character? —She is quite right, isn't she? But I did not think of that. I suppose I am impetuous, as people say. I was unhappy, and I thought you would—receive me with open arms. It is evident *I* am not the sensible one.' She said this with still a quiver in her lip, but also a smile, pushing back her chair, and resuming the unconcerned air which she had worn at first.

'Frances is quite right. You ought to have written and warned us,' said Mr. Waring.

'Oh yes; there are so many things that one ought to do.'

'But we will do the best we can for you, now you are here. Mariuccia will easily make a room ready. Where is your baggage? Domenico can go to the railway, to the hotel, wherever you have come from.'

'My box is outside the door. I made them bring it. The woman—is that Mariuccia?—would not take it in. But she let me come in. She was not suspicious. She did not say, "If you are Constance."' And here she laughed, witlalfsound that grated upon Mr. Waring's nerves. He jumped up suddenly from his chair.

'I had no proof that you were Constance,' he said, 'though I believed it. But only your mother's daughter could reproduce that laugh.'

'Has Frances got it?' the girl cried, with an instant lighting up of opposition in her eyes; 'for I am like you, but she is the image of mamma.'

He turned round and looked at Frances, who, feeling that an entire circle of new emotions, unknown to her, had come into being at a bound, stood with a passive, frightened look, spectator of everything, not knowing how to adapt herself to the new turn of affairs.

'By Jove!' her father said, with an air of exasperation she had never seen in him before, 'that is true! But I had never noticed it. Even Frances. You've come to set us all by the ears.'

'Oh no! I'll tell you, if you like, why I came. Mamma—has been more aggravating than usual. I said to myself you would be sure to understand what that meant. And something arose—I will tell you about it after—a complication, something that mamma insisted I should do, though I had made up my mind not to do it.'

'You had better,' said her father, with a smile, 'take care what ideas on that subject you put into your sister's head.'

Constance paused, and looked at Frances with a look which was half scrutinising, half contemptuous. 'Oh, she is not like me,' she said. 'Mamma was very aggravating, as you know she can be. She wanted me—— But I'll tell you after.' And then she began: 'I hope, because you live in Italy, papa, you don't think you ought to be a medieval parent; but that sort of thing in Belgravia, you know, is too ridiculous. It was so out of the question that it was some time before I understood. It was not exactly a case of being locked up in my room and kept on bread and water; but something of the sort. I was so much astonished at first, I did not know what to do; and then it became intolerable. I had nobody I could appeal to, for everybody agreed with her. Markham is generally a safe person; but even Markham took her side. So I immediately thought of you. I said to myself, One's father is the right person to protect one. And I knew, of course, that if anybody in the world could understand how impossible it is to live with mamma when she has taken a thing into her head, it would be you.'

Waring kept his eye upon Frances while this was being said with an almost comic embarrassment. It was half laughable; but it was painful, as so many laughable things are; and there was something like alarm, or rather timidity, in the look. The man looked afraid of the little girl—whom all her life he had treated as a child—and her clear sensible eyes.

'One thinks these things, perhaps, but one does not put them into words,' he said.

'Oh, it is no worse to say them than to think them,' said Constance. 'I always say what I mean. And you must know that things went very far—so far that I couldn't put up with it any longer; so I made up my mind all at once that I would come off to you.'

'And I tell you, you are welcome, my dear. It is so long since I saw you that I could not have recognised you. That is natural enough. But now that you are here—I cannot decide upon the wisdom of the step till I know all the circumstances——'

'Oh, wisdom! I don't suppose there is any wisdom about it. No one expects wisdom from me. But what could I do? There was nothing else that I could do.'

'At all events,' said Waring, with a little inclination of his head and a smile, as if he were talking to a visitor, Frances said to herself—'Frances and I will forgive any lack of wisdom which has given us—this pleasure.' He laughed at himself as he spoke. 'You must expect for a time to feel like a fine lady paying a visit to her poor relations,' he said.

'Oh, I know you will approve of me when you hear everything. Mamma says I am a Waring all over, your own child.'

The sensations with which Frances stood and listened, it would be impossible to describe. Mamma! who was this, of whom the other girl spoke so lightly, whom she had never heard of before? Was it possible that a mother as well as a sister existed for her, as for others, in the unknown world out of which Constance had come? A hundred questions were on her lips, but she controlled herself, and asked none of them.

Reflection, which comes so often slowly, almost painfully, to her came now like the flash of lightning. She would not betray to any one, not even to Constance, that she had never known she had a mother. Papa might be wrong—oh, how wrong he had been!—but she would not betray him. She checked the exclamation on her lips; she subdued her soul altogether, forcing it into silence. This was the secret she had been so anxious to penetrate, which he had kept so closely from her. Why should he have kept it from her? It was evident it had not been kept on the other side. Whatever had happened, had Frances been in trouble, she knew of no one with whom she could have taken refuge; but her sister had known. Her brain was made dizzy by these thoughts. It was open to her now to ask whatever she pleased. The mystery had been made plain; but at the same time her mouth was stopped. She would not confuse her father, nor betray him. It was chiefly from this bewildering sensation, and not, as her father, suddenly grown acute in respect to Frances, thought, from a mortifying consciousness that Constance would speak with more freedom if she were not there, that Frances now spoke. 'I think,' she said, 'that I had better go and see about the rooms. Mariuccia will not know what to do till I come; and you will take care of Constance, papa.'

He looked at her, hearing in her tone a wounded feeling, a touch of forlorn pride, which perhaps was there, but not so much as he thought; but it was Constance who replied: 'Oh yes, we will take care of each other. I have so much to tell him,' with a laugh. Frances was aware that there was relief in it, in the prospect of her own absence, but she did not feel it so strongly as her father did. She gave them both a smile, and went away.

'So that is Frances,' said the new-found sister, looking after her. 'I find her very like mamma. But everybody says I am your child, disposition and all.' She rose, and came up to Waring, who had never lessened the distance between himself and her. She put her hand within his arm and held up her face to him. 'I am like you. I shall be much happier with you. Do you think you will like having me instead of Frances, father?' She clasped his arm against her in a caressing way, and leant her cheek upon the sleeve of his velvet coat. 'Don't you think you would like to have *me*, father, instead of her?' she said.

A whole panorama of the situation, like a landscape, suddenly flashed before Waring's mind. The spell of this caress, and the confidence she showed of being loved, which is so great a charm, and the impulse of nature, so much as that is worth, drew him towards this handsome stranger, who took possession of him and his affections without a doubt, and pushed away the other from his heart and his side with an impulse which his philosophy said was common to all men —or at least, if that was too sweeping, to all women. But in the same moment came that sense of championship and proprietorship, the one inextricably mingled with the other, which makes us all defend our own whenever assailed. Frances was his own; she was his creation; he had taught her almost everything. Poor little Frances! Not like this girl, who could speak for herself, who could go everywhere, half commanding, half taking with guile every heart that she encountered. Frances would never do that. But she would be true, true as the heavens themselves, and never falter. By a sudden gleam of perception he saw that, though he had never told her anything of this, though it must have been a revelation of wonder to her, yet that she had not burst forth into any outcries of astonishment, or asked any compromising questions, or done anything to betray him.

His heart went forth to Frances with an infinite tenderness. He had not been a doting father to her; he had even—being himself what the world calls a clever man, much above her mental level—felt himself to condescend a little, and almost upbraided Heaven for giving him so ordinary a little girl. And Constance, it was easy to see, was a brilliant creature, accustomed to take her place in the world, fit to be any man's companion. But the first result of this revelation was to reveal to him, as he had never seen it before, the modest and true little soul which had developed by his side without much notice from him, whom he had treated with such cruel want of confidence, to whom the shock of this evening's disclosures must have been so great, but who, even in the moment of discovery, shielded him. All this went through his mind with the utmost rapidity. He did not put his new-found child away from him; but there was less enthusiasm than Constance expected in the kiss he gave her. 'I am very glad to have you here, my dear,' he said more coldly than pleased her. 'But why instead of Frances? You will be happier both of you for being together.'

Constance did not disengage herself with any appearance of disappointment. She perceived, perhaps, that she was not to be so triumphant here as was usually her privilege. She relinquished her father's arm after a minute, not too precipitately, and returned to her chair. 'I shall like it, as long as it is possible,' she said. 'It will be very nice for me having a father and sister instead of a mother and brother. But you will find that mamma will not let you off. She likes to have a girl in the house. She will have her pound of flesh.' She threw herself back into her chair with a laugh. 'How quaint it all is; and how beautiful the view must be, and the mountains and the sea! I shall be very happy here—the world forgetting, by the world forgot—and with you, papa.'

## CHAPTER VII

SHE has come to stay,' Frances said.

'What?' cried Mariuccia, making the small monosyllable sound as if it were the biggest word in her vocabulary.

'She has come to stay. She is my sister; papa's daughter as much as I am. She has come—home.' Frances was a little uncertain about the word, and it was only '*a casa*' that she said—'to the house,' which means the same.

Mariuccia threw up her arms in astonishment. 'Then there has been another signorina all the time!' she cried. 'Figure to yourself that I have been with the padrone a dozen years, and I never heard of her before.'

'Papa does not talk very much about his concerns,' said Frances in her faithfulness. 'And what we have got to do is to make her very comfortable. She is very pretty, don't you think? Such beautiful blond hair—and tall. I never shall be tall, I fear. They say she is like papa; but, as is natural, she is much more beautiful than papa.'

'Beauty is as you find it,' said Mariuccia. '*Carina*, no one will ever be so pretty as our own signorina to Domenico and me.—What is the child doing? She is pulling the things off her own bed.—My angel, you have lost your good sense. You are fluttered and upset by this new arrival. The blue room will be very good for the new young lady. Perhaps she will not stay very long?'

The wish was father to the thought. But Frances took no notice of the suggestion. She said briskly, going on with what she was doing, 'She must have my room, Mariuccia. The blue room is *quite* nice; it will do very well for me; but I should like her to feel at home, not to think our house was bare and cold. The blue room would be rather naked, if we were to put her there to-night. It will not be naked for me, for, of course, I am used to it all, and know everything. But when Constance wakes to-morrow morning and looks round her, and wonders where she is—oh, how strange it all seems! —I wish her to open her eyes upon things that are pretty, and to say to herself, "What a delightful house papa has! What a nice room! I feel as if I had been here all my life."'

'Constanza—is that her name? It is rather a common name—not distinguished, like our signorina's. But it is very good for her, I have no doubt. And so you will give her your own room, that she may be fond of the house, and stay and supplant you? That is what will happen. The good one, the one of gold, gets pushed out of the way. I would not give her my room to make her love the house.'

'I think you would, Mariuccia.'

'No; I do not think so,' said Mariuccia, squaring herself with one arm akimbo. 'No; I do not deny that I would probably take some new things into the blue room, and put up curtains. But I am older than you are, and I have more sense. I would not do it. If she gets your room, she will get your place; and she will please everybody, and be admired, and my angel will be put out of the way.'

'I am such a horrid little wretch,' said Frances, 'that I thought of that too. It was mean, oh, so mean of me. She is prettier than I am, and taller; and—yes, of course, she must be older too, so you see it is her right.'

'Is she the eldest?' asked Mariuccia.

Frances made a puzzled pause; but she would not let the woman divine that she did not know. 'Oh yes; she must be the eldest.—Come quick, Mariuccia; take all these things to the blue room; and now for your clean linen and everything that is nice and sweet.'

Mariuccia did what she was told, but with many objections. She carried on a running murmur of protest all the time. 'When there are changes in a family; when it is by the visitation of God, that is another matter. A son or a daughter who is in trouble, who has no other refuge; that is natural; there is nothing to say. But to remain away during a dozen years, and then to come back at a moment's notice—nay, without even a moment's notice—in the evening, when all the beds are made up, and demand everything that is comfortable. —I have always thought that there was a great deal to be said for the poor young signorino of whom the priest speaks, he who had always stayed at home when his brother was amusing himself. *Carina*, you know what I mean.'

'I have thought of that too,' said Frances. 'But my sister is not a prodigal; and papa has never done anything for her. It is all quite different. When we know each other better, it will be delightful always to have a companion, Mariuccia—think how pleasant it will be always to have a companion. I wonder if she will like my pictures?—Now, don't you think the room looks very pretty? I always thought it was a pretty room. Leave the *persiani* open that she may see the sea; and in the morning don't forget to come in and close them before the sun gets hot.—I think that will do now.'

'Indeed I hope it will do—after all the trouble you have taken. And I hope the young lady is worthy of it.—But, my angel, what shall I do when I come in to wake her? Does she expect that I can talk her language to her? No, no. And she will know nothing; she will not even be able to say "Good morning."'

'I hope so. But if not, you must call me first, that is all,' said Frances cheerfully.—'Now, don't go to bed just yet; perhaps she will like something—some tea; or perhaps a little supper; or—— I never asked if she had dined.'

Mariuccia regarded this possibility with equanimity. She was not afraid of a girl's appetite. But she made a grimace at the mention of the tea. ‘It is good when one has a cold; oh yes,’ she said; ‘but to drink it at all times, as you do! If she wants anything it will be a great deal better to give her a sirop, or a little red wine.’

Frances detained Mariuccia as long as she could, and lingered herself still longer after all was ready in the room. She did not know how to go back to the drawing-room, where she had left these two together, to say to each other, no doubt, many things that could be better said in her absence. There was no jealousy, only delicacy, in this; and she had given up her pretty room to her sister, and carried her indispensable belongings to the bare one, with the purest pleasure in making Constance comfortable. Constance! whom an hour ago she had never heard of, and who now was one of them, nearer to her than anybody, except her father. But all this being done, she had the strangest difficulty in going back, in thrusting herself, as imagination said, between them, and interrupting their talk. To think that it should be such a tremendous matter to return to that familiar room in which the greater part of her life had been passed! It felt like another world into which she was about to enter, full of unknown elements and conditions which she did not understand. She had not known what it was to be shy in the very limited society she had ever known; but she was shy now, feeling as if she had not courage to put her hand upon the handle of the door. The familiar creak and jar of it as it opened seemed to her like noisy instruments announcing her approach, which stopped the conversation, as she had divined, and made her father and her sister look up with a little start. Frances could have wished to sink through the floor, to get rid of her own being altogether, as she saw them both give this slight start. Constance was leaning upon the table, the light of the lamp shining full upon her face, with the air of being in the midst of an animated narrative, which she stopped when Frances entered; and Mr. Waring had been listening with a smile. He turned half round and held ou [illegible] his hand to the timid girl behind him. ‘Co [illegible] said, ‘you have been a long time ma [illegible] Have you been bringing out the [illegible] It was odd how the parab [illegible] their circumstances—h [illegible]

'Your room is quite ready whenever you please. And would you like tea or anything? I ought to have asked if you had dined,' Frances said.

'Is she the housekeeper?—How odd!—Do you look after everything?—Dear me! I am afraid, in that case, I shall make a very poor substitute for Frances, papa.'

'It is not necessary to think of that,' he said hastily, giving her a quick glance.

Frances saw it, with another involuntary, quickly suppressed pang. Of course there would be things that Constance must be warned not to say. And yet it felt as if papa had deserted her and gone over to the other side. She had not the remotest conception what the warning referred to, or what Constance meant.

'I dined at the hotel,' Constance went on, 'with those people whom I travelled with. I suppose you will have to call and be civil. They were quite delighted to think that they would know somebody at Bordighera—some of the inhabitants.—Yes, tea, if you please. And then I think I shall go to bed; for twenty-four hours in the train is very fatiguing, besides the excitement. Don't you think Frances is very much like mamma? There is a little way she has of setting her chin.—Look there! That is mamma all over. I think they would get on together very well: indeed I feel sure of it.' And again there was a significant look exchanged, which once more went like a sting to Frances' heart.

'Your sister has been telling me,' said Mr. Waring, with a little hesitation, 'of a great many people I used to know. You must be very much surprised, my dear; but I will take an opportunity——' He was confused before her, as if he had been before a judge. He gave her a look which was half shame and half gratitude, sentiments both entirely out of place between him and Frances. She could not bear that he should look at her so.

'Yes, papa,' she said as easily as she could; 'I know you must have a great deal to talk of. If Constance will give me her keys I will unpack her things for her.' Both the girls instinctively, oddly, addressed each other through their father, the only link between them, hesitating a little at the familiarity which nature made necessary, but which had [illegible]ther warrant.

'Oh, isn't there a maid who can do it?' Constance cried, opening her eyes.

The evening seemed long to Frances, though it was not long. Constance trifled over the tea—which Mariuccia made with much reluctance—for half an hour. But she talked all the time; and as her talk was of people Frances had never heard of, and was mingled with little allusions to what had passed before,—'I told you about him;' 'You remember, we were talking of them;' with a constant recurrence of names which to Frances meant nothing at all,—it seemed long to her.

She sat down at the table, and took her knitting, and listened, and tried to look as if she took an interest. She did indeed take a great interest; no one could have been more eager to enter without *arrière-pensée* into the new life thus unfolded before her; and sometimes she was amused and could laugh at the stories Constance was telling; but her chief feeling was that sense of being entirely 'out of it'—having nothing to do with it—which makes people who do not understand society feel like so many ghosts standing on the margin, knowing nothing. The feeling was strange and very forlorn. It is an unpleasant experience even for those who are strangers, to whom it is a passing incident; but as the speaker was her sister and the listener her father, Frances felt this more deeply still. Generally in the evening conversation flagged between them. He would have his book, and Frances sometimes had a book too, or a drawing upon which she could work, or at least her knitting. She had felt that the silence which reigned in the room on such occasions was not what ought to be. It was not like the talk which was supposed to go on in all the novels she had ever read where the people were *nice*. And sometimes she attempted to entertain her father with little incidents in the life of their poor neighbours, or things which Mariuccia had told her; but he listened benevolently, with his finger between the leaves of his book, or even without closing his book, looking up at her over the leaves—only out of kindness to her, not because he was interested; and then silence would fall on them, a silence which was very sweet to Frances, in the midst of which her own little stream of thoughts flowed on continuously, but which now and then she was struck to the heart to think must be very dull for papa.

But to-night it was not dull for him. She listened, and said to herself this was the way to make conversation; and laughed whenever she could, and followed every little gesture of her sister's with admiring eyes. But at the end, Frances, though she would not acknowledge it to herself, felt that she had not been amused. She thought the people in the village were just as interesting. But then she was not so clever as Constance, and could not do them justice in the same way.

'And now I am going to bed,' Constance said. She rose up in an instant with a rapid movement, as if the thought had only just struck her and she obeyed the impulse at once. There was a freedom about all her movements which troubled and captivated Frances. She had been leaning half over the table, her sleeves, which were a little wide, falling back from her arms, now leaning her chin in the hollow of one hand, now supporting it with both, putting her elbows wherever she pleased. Frances herself had been trained by Mariuccia to very great decorum in respect to attitudes. If she did furtively now and then lean an elbow upon the table, she was aware that it was wrong all the time; and as for legs, she knew it was only men who were permitted to cross them, or to do anything save sit with two feet equal to each other upon the floor. But Constance cared for none of these rules. She rose up abruptly (Mariuccia would have said, as if something had stung her), almost before she had finished what she was saying. 'Show me my room, please,' she said, and yawned. She yawned quite freely, naturally, without any attempt to conceal or to apologise for it as if it had been an accident. Frances could not help being shocked, yet neither could she help laughing with a sort of pleasure in this breach of all rules. But Constance only stared, and did not in the least understand why she should laugh.

'Where have you put your sister?' Mr. Waring asked.

'I have put her—in the room next to yours, papa; between your room and mine, you know: for I am in the blue room now. There she will not feel strange; she will have people on each side.'

'That is to say, you have given her——'

It was Frances' turn now to give a warning glance. 'The room I thought she would like best,' she said, with a soft but decisive tone. She too had a little imperious way of her own. It was so soft that a stranger would not have found it out; but in the Palazzo they were all acquainted with it, and no one —not even Mariuccia—found it possible to say a word after this small trumpet had sounded. Mr. Waring accordingly was silenced, and made no further remark. He went with his daughters to the door, and kissed the cheek which Constance held lightly to him. 'I shall see you again, papa,' Frances said, in that same little determined voice.

Mr. Waring did not make any reply, but shrank a little aside, to let her pass. He looked like a man who was afraid. She had spared him; she had not betrayed the ignorance in which he had brought her up; but now the moment of reckoning was near, and he was afraid of Frances. He went back into the *salone*, and walked up and down with a restlessness which was natural enough, considering how all the embers of his life had been raked up by this unexpected event. He had lived in absolute quiet for fourteen long years: a strange life—a life which might have been supposed to be impossible for a man still in the heyday of his strength; but yet, as it appeared, a life which suited him, which he preferred to others more natural. To settle down in an Italian village with a little girl of six for his sole companion—when he came to think of it, nothing could be more unnatural, more extraordinary; and yet he had liked it well enough, as well as he could have liked anything at that crisis of his fate. He was the kind of man who, in other circumstances, in another age, would have made himself a monk, and spent his existence very placidly in illuminating manuscripts. He had done something as near this as is possible to an Englishman not a Roman Catholic, of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, Waring had no ecclesiastical tendencies, or even in the nineteenth century he might have found out for himself some pseudo-monkery in which he could have been happy. As it was, he had retired with his little girl, and on the whole had been comfortable enough. But now the little girl had grown up, and required to have various things accounted for; and the other individuals who had claims upon him, whom he thought he had shaken off altogether, had turned up again, and had to be dealt with. The monk had an easy time of it in comparison. He who has but himself to think of may manage himself, if he has good luck; but the responsibility of others on your shoulders is a terrible drawback to tranquillity. A little girl! That seemed the simplest of all things. It had never occurred to him that she would form a link by which all his former burdens might be drawn back; or that she, more wonderful still, should ever arise and demand to know why. But both of these impossible things had happened.

Waring walked about the *salone.* He opened the glass door and stepped out into the loggia, into the tranquil shining of the moon, which lit up all the blues of the sea, and kindled little silver lamps all over the quivering palms. How quiet it was! and yet that tranquil nature lying unmoved, taking whatever came of good or evil, did harm in a far more colossal way than any man could do. The sea, then looking so mild, would suddenly rise up and bring havoc and destruction worse than an army; yet next day smile again, and throw its spray into the faces of the children, and lie like a harmless thing under the light. But a man could not do this. A man had to give an account of all that he had done, whether it was good or whether it was evil,—if not to God—which on the whole was the easiest, for God knew all about it, how little harm had been intended, how little anything had been intended, how one mistake involved another,—if not to God—why, to some one harder to face; perhaps to one's little girl.

He came back from the loggia and the moonlight and nature, which, all of them, were so indifferent to what was happening to him, with a feeling that the imperfect human lamp which so easily got out of gear—as easily as a man—was a more appropriate light for his disturbed soul: and met Frances with her brown eyes waiting for him at the door.

## CHAPTER VIII

'IT is not because of this only, papa—I wanted before to speak to you. I was waiting in the loggia for you when Constance came.'

'What did you want, Frances? Oh, I quite acknowledge that you have a right to inquire. I hoped, perhaps, I might be spared to-night; I am rather exhausted—to-night.'

Frances dropped the hand which she had laid upon his arm. 'It shall be exactly as you please, papa. I seem to know a great deal—oh, a great deal more than I knew at dinner. I don't think I am the same person; and I thought it might save us all trouble if you would tell me—as much as you think I ought to know.'

She had sat down in her usual place, in her careful little modest pose, a little stiff, a little prim—the training of Mariuccia. After Constance, there was something in the attitude of Frances which made her father smile, though he was in no mood for smiling; and it was clear that he could not, that he ought not to escape. He would not sit down, however, and meet her eye. He stood by the table for a few minutes, with his eyes upon the books, turning them over, as if he were looking for something. At last he said, but without looking up, 'There is nothing very dreadful to tell; no guilty secret, though you may suppose so. Your mother and I——'

'Then I have really a mother, and she is living?' the girl cried.

He looked at her for a moment. 'I forgot that for a girl of your age that means a great deal—I hadn't thought of it. Perhaps if you knew—— Yes; you have got a mother, and she is living. I suppose that seems a very wonderful piece of news?'

Frances did not say anything. The water came into her eyes. Her heart beat loudly, yet softly, against her young bosom. She had known it, so that she was not surprised. The surprise had been broken by Constance's careless talk, by the wonder, the doubt, the sense of impossibility, which had gradually yielded to a conviction that it must be so. Her feeling was that she would like to go now, without delay, without asking any more questions, to her mother. Her mother! and he hadn't thought before how much that meant to a girl—of her age!

Mr. Waring was a little disconcerted by having no answer. Of course it meant a great deal to a girl; but still, not so much as to make her incapable of reply. He felt a little annoyed, disturbed, perhaps jealous, as Frances herself had been. It was with difficulty that he resumed again; but it had to be done.

'Your mother and I,' he said, taking up the books again, opening and shutting them, looking at the title-page now of one, now of another, 'did not get on very well. I don't know who was in fault—probably both. She had been married before. She had a son whom you hear Constance speak of as Markham. Markham has been at the bottom of all the trouble. He drove me out of my senses when he was a boy. Now he is a man: so far as I can make out it is he that has disturbed our peace again—hunted us up, and sent Constance here. If you ever meet Markham—and of course now you are sure to meet him—beware of him.' Here he made a pause again, and looked with great seriousness at the book in his hand, turning the leaf to finish a sentence which was continued on the next page.

'I beg your pardon, papa,' said Frances; 'I am afraid I am very stupid. What relation is Markham to me?'

He looked at her for a moment, then threw down the book with some violence on the table, as if it were the offender. 'He is your step-brother,' he said.

'My—brother? Then I have a brother too?' After a little pause she added, 'It is very wonderful, papa, to come into a new world like this all at once. I want—to draw my breath.'

'It is my fault that it comes upon you all at once. I never thought—— You were a very small child when I brought you away. You forgot them all, as was natural. I did not at first know how entirely a child forgets; and then—then it seemed a pity to disturb your mind, and perhaps set you longing for—what it was impossible for you to obtain.'

It surprised him a little that Frances did not breathe a syllable of reproach. She said nothing. In her imagination she was looking back over these years, wondering how it would have been had she known. Would life ever be the same, now that she did know? The world seemed to open up round her, so much greater, wider, more full than she had thought. She had not thought much on the subject. Life in Bordighera was more limited even than life in an English village. The fact that she did not belong to the people among whom she had spent all these years, made a difference; and her father's recluse habits, the few people he cared to know, the stagnation of his life, made a greater difference still. Frances had scarcely felt it until that meeting with the Mannerings, which put so many vague ideas into her mind. A child does not naturally inquire into the circumstances which have surrounded it all its life. It was natural to her to live in this retired place, to see nobody, to make amusements and occupations for herself—to know no one more like herself than Tasie Durant. Had she even possessed any girl friends living the natural life of youth, that might have inspired a question or two. But she knew no girls—except Tasie, whose girlhood was a sort of fossil, and who might almost have been the mother of Frances. She saw indeed the village girls, but it did not occur to her to compare herself with them. Familiar as she was with all their ways, she was still a *forestière*—one of the barbarous people, English, a word which explains every difference. Frances did not quite know in what the peculiarity and eccentricity of the English consisted; but she, too, recognised with all simplicity that, being English, she was different. Now it came suddenly to her mind that the difference was not anything generic and general, but that it was her own special circumstances that had been unlike all the rest. There had been a mother all the time; another girl, a sister, like herself. It made her brain whirl.

She sat quite silent, thinking it all over, not perceiving her father's embarrassment—thinking less of him, indeed, than of all the wonderful new things that seemed to crowd about her. She did not blame him. She was not thinking enough of him to blame him; her mind was quite sufficiently occupied by her discoveries. As she had taken him all her life without examination, she continued to take him. He was her father; that was enough. It did not occur to her to ask herself whether what he had done was right or wrong. Only, it was all very strange. The old solid earth had gone from under her feet, and the old order of things had been overthrown. She was looking out upon a world not realised—a spectator of something like the throes of creation, seeing the new landscape tremble and roll into place, the heights and hollows all changing; there was a great deal of excitement in it, both pain and pleasure. It occupied her so fully that he fell back into a secondary place.

But this did not occur to Waring. He had not realised that it could be possible. He felt himself the centre of the system in which his little daughter lived, and did not understand how she could ignore him. He thought her silence—the silence of amazement, and excitement, and of that curious spectatorship—was the silence of reproach, and that her mind was full of a sense of wrong, which only duty kept in check. He felt himself on his trial before her. Having said all that he had to say, he remained silent, expecting her response. If she had given vent to an indignant exclamation, he would have been relieved; he would have allowed that she had a right to be indignant. But her silence was more than he could bear. He searched through the recesses of his own thoughts; but for the moment he could not find any further excuse for himself. He had done it for the best. Probably she would not see that. Waring was well enough acquainted with the human mind to know that every individual sees such a question from his or her own point of view: and he was prepared to find that his daughter would be unable to perceive what was so plain to him. But still he was aware that he had done it for the best. After a while the silence became so irksome to him that he felt compelled to break it and resume his explanations. If she would not say anything, there were a number of things which he might say.

'It is a pity,' he said, 'that it has all broken upon you so suddenly. If I could have divined that Constance would have taken such a step—— To tell you the truth, I have never realised Constance at all,' he added, with an impulse towards the daughter he knew. 'She was of course a mere child: to see her so independent, and with so distinct a will of her own, is very bewildering. I assure you, Frances, if it is wonderful to you, it is scarcely less wonderful to me.'

There was something in his tone that made her lift her eyes to him; and to see him stand there so embarrassed, so subdued, so much unlike the father who, though very kind and tender, had always been perhaps a little condescending, patronising, towards the girl, whom he scarcely recognised as an independent entity, went to her heart. She could not tell him not to be frightened—not to look at her with that guilty, apologetic look, which altogether reversed their ordinary relationship; but it added a pang to her bewilderment. She asked hastily, by way of concealing this uncomfortable change, a question which she thought he would have no difficulty in answering—'Is Constance much older than I am, papa?'

He gave a sort of furtive smile, as if he had no right to smile in the circumstances. 'I don't wonder at your question. She has seen a great deal more of the world. But if there is a minute or two between you, I don't know which has it. There is no elder or younger in the case. You are twins, though no one would think so.'

This gave Frances a further shock—though why, it would be impossible to say. The blood rushed to her face. 'She must think me—a very poor little thing,' she said, in a hurried tone. 'I never knew—I have no friend except Tasie—to show me what girls might be.' The thought mortified her in an extraordinary way; it brought a sudden gush of salt tears—tears quite different from those which had welled to her eyes when he told her of her mother. Constance, who was so different, would despise her—Constance, who knew exactly all about it, and that Frances was as old, perhaps a few minutes older than she. It is always difficult to divine what form pride will take. This was the manner in which it affected Frances. The same age! and yet the one an accomplished woman, judging for herself—and the other not much more than a child.

'You do yourself injustice,' said Mr. Waring, somewhat rehabilitated by the mortification of Frances. 'Nobody could think you a poor little thing. You have not the same knowledge of the world. Constance has been very differently brought up. I think my training a great deal better than what she has had,' he added quickly, with a mingled desire to cheer and restore self-confidence to Frances, and to reassert himself after his humiliation. He felt what he said; and yet, as was natural, he said a little more than he felt. 'I must tell you,' he said, in this new impulse, 'that your mother is—a much more important person than I am. She is a great deal richer. The marriage was supposed to be much to my advantage.'

There was a smile on his face which Frances, looking up suddenly, warned by a certain change of tone, did not like to see. She kept her eyes upon him instinctively, she could not tell why, with a look which had a certain influence upon him, though he did not well understand it either. It meant that the unknown woman of whom he spoke was the girl's mother —her mother—one of whom no unbefitting word was to be said. It checked him in a quite curious unexpected way. When he had spoken of her, which he had done very rarely since they parted, it had been with a sense that he was free to characterise her as he thought she deserved. But here he was stopped short. That very evening he had said things to Constance of her mother which in a moment he felt that he dared not say to Frances. The sensation was a very strange one. He made a distinct pause, and then he said hurriedly, 'You must not for a moment suppose that there was anything wrong; there is no story that you need be afraid of hearing —nothing, neither on her side nor mine—nothing to be ashamed of.'

All at once Frances grew very pale; her eyes opened wide; she gazed at him with speechless horror. The idea was altogether new to her artless mind. It flashed through his that Constance would not have been at all surprised—that probably she would have thought it 'nice of him' to exonerate his wife from all moral shortcoming. The holy ignorance of the other brought a sensation of shame to Waring, and at the same time a sensation of pride. Nothing could more clearly have proved the superiority of his training. She would have felt no consternation, only relief at this assurance, if she had been all her life in her mother's hands.

'It is a great deal to say, however, though you are too inexperienced to know. The whole thing was incompatibility —incompatibility of temper, and of ideas, and of tastes, and of fortune even. I could not, you may suppose, accept advantages purchased with my predecessor's money, or take the good of his rank through my wife; and she would not come down in the world to my means and to my name. It was an utter mistake altogether. We should have understood each other beforehand. It was impossible that we could get on. But that was all. There was probably more talk about it than if there had been really more to talk about.'

Frances rose up with a little start. 'I think, perhaps,' she said, 'I don't want you to tell me any more.'

'Well—perhaps you are right.' But he was startled by her quick movement. 'I did not mean to say anything that could shock you. If you are to hear anything at all, the truth is what you must hear. But you must not blame me overmuch, Frances. Your very impatience of what I have been saying will explain to you why I thought that to say nothing—as long as I could help it—was the best.'

Her hand trembled a little as she lighted her candle, but she made no comment. 'Good-night, papa. To-morrow it will all seem different. Everything is strange to-night.'

He put his hands upon her shoulders and looked down into the little serious face, the face that had never been so serious before. 'Don't think any worse of me, Frances, than you can help.'

Her eyes opened wider with astonishment. 'Think of you, worse—— But, papa, I am not thinking of you at all,' she said simply; 'I am thinking of *it*.'

Waring had gone through a number of depressing and humbling experiences during the course of the evening, but this was the unkindest of all—and it was so natural. Frances was no critic. She was not thinking of his conduct, which was the first thing in his mind, but of IT, the revelation which had been made to her. He might have perceived that, or divined it, if he had not been occupied by this idea, which did not occupy her at all—the thought of how he personally had come through the business. He gave a little faltering laugh at himself as he stooped and kissed her. 'That's all right,' he said. 'Good-night; but don't let IT interfere with your sleep. To-morrow everything will look different, as you say.'

Frances turned away with her light in her hand; but before she had reached the door, returned again. 'I think I ought to tell you, papa, that I am sure the Durants know. They said a number of strange things to me yesterday, which I think I understand now. If you don't mind, I would rather let them suppose that I knew all the time; otherwise it looks as if you thought you could not trust me.'

'I could trust you,' he said, with a little fervour,—'my dear child, my dear little girl—I would trust you with my life.'

Was there a faint smile in the little girl's limpid simple eyes? He thought so, and it disconcerted him strangely. She made no response to that protestation, but with a little nod of her head went away. Waring sat down at the table again, and began to think it all over from the beginning. He was sore and aching, like a man who has fallen from a height. He had fallen from the pedestal on which, to Frances, he had stood all these years. She might not be aware of it even—but he was. And he had fallen from those Elysian fields of peace in which he had been dwelling for so long. They had not, perhaps, seemed very Elysian while he was secure of their possession. They had been monotonous in their stillness, and wearied his soul. But now that he looked back upon them, a new cycle having begun, they seemed to him like the very home of peace. He had not done anything to forfeit this tranquillity; and yet it was over, and he stood once more on the edge of an agitated and disturbed life. He was a man who could bear monotony, who liked his own way, yet liked that bondage of habit which is as hard as iron to some souls. He liked to do the same things at the same time day after day, and to be undisturbed in doing them. But now all his quiet was over. Constance would have a thousand requirements such as Frances had never dreamed of; and her brother no doubt would soon turn up—that step-brother whom Waring had never been able to tolerate even when he was a child. She might even come Herself—who could tell?

When this thought crossed his mind, he got up hastily and left the *salone*, leaving the lamp burning, as Domenico found it next morning, to his consternation—a symbol of Chaos come again—burning in the daylight. Mr. Waring almost fled to his room and locked his door in the horror of that suggestion. And this was not only because the prospect of such a visit disturbed him beyond measure, but because he had not yet made a clean breast of it. Frances did not yet know all.

Frances for her part went to the blue room, and opened the *persiani*, and sat looking out upon the moonlight for some time before she went to bed. The room was bare; she missed her pictures, which Constance had taken no notice of—the Madonna that had been above her head for so many years, and which had vaguely appeared to her as a symbol of the mother who had never existed in her life. Now there seemed less need for the Madonna. The bare walls had pictures all over them—pictures of a new life. In imagination, no one is shy, or nervous, or strange. She let the new figures move about her freely, and delighted herself with familiar pictures of them and the changes that must accompany them. She was not like her father, afraid of changes. She thought of the new people, the new combinations, the quickened life: and the thought made her smile. They would come, and she would make the house gay and bright to receive them. Perhaps some time, surrounded by this new family that belonged to her, she might even be taken 'home.' The thought was delightful notwithstanding the thrill of excitement in it. But still there was something which Frances did not know.

## CHAPTER IX

'WHAT is this I hear about Waring?' said General Gaunt, walking out upon the loggia, where the Durants were sitting, on the same memorable afternoon on which all that has been above related occurred. The General was dressed in loosely-fitting light-coloured clothes. It was one of the recommendations of the Riviera to him that he could wear out there all his old Indian clothes, which would have been useless to him at home. He was a very tall old man, very yellow, nay, almost greenish in the complexion, extremely spare, with a fine old white moustache, which had an immense effect upon his brown face. The well-worn epigram might be adapted in his case to say that nobody ever was so fierce as the General looked; and yet he was at bottom rather a mild old man, and had never hurt anybody, except the sepoys in the Mutiny, all his life. His head was covered with a broad light felt hat, which, soft as it was, took an aggressive cock when he put it on. He held his gloves dangling from his hand with the air of having been in too much haste to put them to their proper use. And his step, as he stepped off the carpet upon the marble of the loggia, sounded like that of an alert officer who has just heard that the enemy has made a reconnaissance in force two miles off, and that there is no time to lose. 'What is this I hear about Waring?' he said.

'Yes, indeed!' cried Mrs. Durant.

'It is a most remarkable story,' said his Reverence, shaking his head.

'But what is it?' asked the General. 'I found Mrs. Gaunt almost crying when I went in. What she said was, "Charles, we have been nourishing a viper in our bosoms." I am not addicted to metaphor, and I insisted upon plain English; and then it all came out. She told me Waring was an impostor, and had been taking us all in; that some old friend of his had been here, and had told you. Is that true?'

'My dear!' said Mr. Durant in a tone of remonstrance.

'Well, Henry! you never said it was to be kept a secret. It could not possibly be kept a secret—so few of us here, and all so intimate.'

'Then he is an impostor?' said General Gaunt.

'Oh, my dear General, that's too strong a word. Henry, you had better tell the General, your own way.'

The old clergyman had been shaking his head all the time. He was dying to tell all that he knew, yet he could not but improve the occasion. 'Oh, ladies, ladies!' he said, 'when there is anything to be told, the best of women is not to be trusted. But, General, our poor friend is no impostor. He never said he was a widower.'

'It's fortunate we've none of us girls——' the General began; then with a start, 'I forgot Miss Tasie; but she's a girl—a girl in ten thousand,' he added, with a happy inspiration. Tasie, who was still seated behind the teacups, gave him a smile in reply.

'Poor dear Mr. Waring,' she said, 'whether he is a widower or has a wife, it does not matter much. Nobody can call Mr. Waring a flirt. He might be any one's grandfather from his manner. I cannot see that it matters a bit.'

'Not so far as we are concerned, thank heaven!' said her mother, with the air of one whose dear child has escaped a danger. 'But I don't think it is quite respectable for one of our small community to have a wife alive and never to let any one know.'

'I understand, a most excellent woman; besides being a person of rank,' said Mr. Durant. 'It has disturbed me very much—though, happily, as my wife says, from no private motive.' Here the good man paused, and gave vent to a sigh of thankfulness, establishing the impression that his ingenuous Tasie had escaped as by a miracle from Waring's wiles; and then he continued, 'I think some one should speak to him on the subject. He ought to understand that now it is known, public opinion requires—— Some one should tell him——'

'There is no one so fit as a clergyman,' the General said.

'That is true, perhaps, in the abstract; but with our poor friend—— There are some men who will not take advice from a clergyman.'

'O Henry! do him justice. He has never shown anything but respect to you.'

'I should say that a man of the world, like the General——

'Oh, not I,' cried the General, getting up hurriedly. 'No, thank you; I never interfere with any man's affairs. That's your business, Padre. Besides, I have no daughter: whether he is married or not is nothing to me.'

'Nor to us, heaven be praised!' said Mrs. Durant; and then she added, 'it is not for ourselves; it is for poor little Frances, a girl that has never known a mother's care! How much better for her to be with her mother, and properly introduced into society, than living in that hugger-mugger way, without education, without companions! If it were not for Tasie, the child would never see a creature near her own age.'

'And I am much older than Frances,' said Tasie, rather to heighten the hardship of the situation than from any sense that this was true.

'Decidedly the Padre ought to talk to him,' said the Anglo-Indian. 'He ought to be made to feel that everybody at the station—— Wife all right, do you know? Bless me! if the wife is all right, what does the man mean? Why can't they quarrel peaceably, and keep up appearances, as we all do?'

'Oh no—not all; *we* never quarrel.'

'Not for a long time, my love.'

'Henry, you may trust to my memory. Not for about thirty years. We had a little disagreement then about where we were to go for the summer. Oh, I remember it well—the agony it cost me! Don't say "as we *all* do," General, for it would not be true.'

'Your are a pair of old turtle-doves,' quoth the General. 'All the more reason why you should talk to him, Padre. Tell him he's come among us on false pretences, not knowing the damage he might have done. I always thought he was a queer hand to have the education of a little girl.'

'He taught her Latin; and that woman of theirs, Mariuccia, taught her to knit. That's all she knows. And her mother all the time in such a fine position, able to do anything for her! Oh, it is of Frances I think most!'

'It is quite evident,' said the General, 'that Mr. Durant must interfere.'

'I think it very likely I shall do no good. A man of the world, a man like that——'

'There is no such great harm about the man.'

'And he is very good to Frances,' said Tasie, almost under her breath.

'I daresay he meant no harm,' said the General, 'if that is all. Only, he should be warned; and if anything can be done for Frances—— It is a pity she should see nobody, and never have a chance of establishing herself in life.'

'She ought to be introduced into society,' said Mrs. Durant. 'As for establishing herself in life, that is in the hands of Providence, General. It is not to be supposed that such an idea ever enters into a girl's mind—unless it is put there, which is so often the case.'

'The General means,' said Tasie, 'that seeing people would make her more fit to be a companion for her papa. Frances is a dear girl; but it is quite true—she is wanting in conversation. They often sit a whole evening together and scarcely speak.'

'She is a nice little thing,' said the General energetically—'I always thought so; and never was at a dance, I suppose, or a junketing of any description, in her life. To be sure, we are all old duffers in this place. The Padre should interfere.'

'If I could see it was my duty,' said Mr. Durant.

'I know what you mean,' said General Gaunt. 'I'm not too fond of interference myself. But when a man has concealed his antecedents, and they have been found out. And then the little girl——'

'Yes: it is Frances I think of most,' said Mr. Durant.

It was at last settled among them that it was clearly the clergyman's business to interfere. He had been tolerably certain to begin with, but he liked the moral support of what he called a consensus of opinion. Mr. Durant was not so reluctant as he professed to be. He had not much scope for those social duties which, he was of opinion, were not the least important of a clergyman's functions; and though there was a little excitement in the uncertainty from Sunday to Sunday how many people would be at church, what the collection would be, and other varying circumstances, yet the life of the clergyman at Bordighera was monotonous, and a little variety was welcome. In other chaplaincies which Mr. Durant had held, he had come in contact with various romances of real life. These were still the days of gaming, when every German bath had its *tapis vert* and its little troupe of tragedies. But the Riviera was very tranquil, and Bordighera had just been found out by the invalid and the pleasure-seeker. It was monotonous: there had been few deaths, even among the visitors, which are always varieties in their way for the clergyman, and often are the means of making acquaintances both useful and agreeable to himself and his family. But as yet there had not even been many deaths. This gave great additional excitement to what is always exciting, for a small community—the cropping up under their very noses, in their own immediate circle, of a mystery, of a discovery which afforded boundless opportunity for talk. The first thing naturally that had affected Mr. and Mrs. Durant was the miraculous escape of Tasie, to whom Mr. Waring *might* have made himself agreeable, and whose peace of mind might have been affected, for anything that could be said to the contrary. They said to each other that it was a hair-breadth escape; although it had not occurred previously to any one that any sort of mutual attraction between Mr. Waring and Tasie was possible.

And then the other aspects of the case became apparent. Mr. Durant felt now that to pass it over, to say nothing about the matter, to allow Waring to suppose that everything was as it had always been, was impossible. He and his wife had decided this without the intervention of General Gaunt; but when the General appeared—the only other permanent pillar of society in Bordighera—then there arose that consensus which made further steps inevitable. Mrs. Gaunt looked in later, after dinner, in the darkening; and she, too, was of opinion that something must be done. She was affected to tears by the thought of that mystery in their very midst, and of what the poor (unknown) lady must have suffered, deserted by her husband, and bereft of her child. 'He might at least have left her her child,' she said, with a sob; and she was fully of opinion that he should be spoken to without delay, and that they should not rest till Frances had been restored to her mother. She thought it was 'a duty' on the part of Mr. Durant to interfere. The consensus was thus unanimous; there was not a dissentient voice in the entire community. 'We will sleep upon it,' Mr. Durant said. But the morning brought no further light. They were all agreed more strongly than ever that Waring ought to be spoken to, and that it was undeniably a duty for the clergyman to interfere.

Mr. Durant accordingly set out before it was too late, before the mid-day breakfast, which is the coolest and calmest moment of the day, the time for business, before social intercourse is supposed to begin. He was very carefully brushed from his hat to his shoes, and was indeed a very agreeable example of a neat old clerical gentleman. Ecclesiastical costume was much more easy in those days. It was before the era of long coats and soft hats, when a white tie was the one incontrovertible sign of the clergyman who did not think of calling himself a priest. He was indeed, having been for a number of years located in Catholic countries, very particular not to call himself a priest, or to condescend to any garb which could recall the *soutane* and three-cornered hat of the indigenous clergy. His black clothes were spotless, but of the ordinary cut, perhaps a trifle old-fashioned. But yet neither *soutane* nor *berretta* could have made it more evident that Mr. Durant, setting out with an ebony stick and black gloves, was an English clergyman going mildly but firmly to interfere. Had he been met with in the wilds of Africa, even there mistake would have been impossible. In his serious eye, in the aspect of the corners of his mouth, in a certain air of gentle determination diffused over his whole person, this was apparent. It made a great impression upon Domenico when he opened the door. After what had happened yesterday, Domenico felt that anything might happen. 'Lo, this man's brow, like to a title-leaf, foretells the nature of the tragic volume,' he said to Mariuccia—at least if he did not use these words, his meaning was the same. He ushered the English pastor into the room which Mr. Waring occupied as a library, with bated breath. 'Master is going to catch it,' was what, perhaps, a light-minded Cockney might have said. But Domenico was a serious man and did not trifle.

Waring's library was, like all the rooms of his suite, an oblong room, with three windows and as many doors, opening into the dining-room on one hand, and the ante-room on the other. It had the usual indecipherable fresco on the roof, and the walls on one side were half clothed with bookcases. Not a very large collection of books, and yet enough to make a pretty show, with their old gilding, and the dull white of the vellum in which so many were bound. It was a room in which he spent the most of his time, and it had been made comfortable according to the notions of comfort prevailing in these regions. There was a square of carpet under his writing-table. His chair was a large old *fauteuil*, covered with faded damask; and curtains, also faded, were festooned over all the windows and doors. The *persiani* were shut to keep out the sun, and the cool atmosphere had a greenish tint. Waring, however, did not look so peaceful as his room. He sat with his chair pushed away from the table, reading what seemed to be a novel. He had the air of a man who had taken refuge there from some embarrassment or annoyance; not the tranquil look of a man occupied in so-called studies needing leisure, with his note-books at hand, and pen and ink within reach. Such a man is usually very glad to be interrupted in the midst of his self-imposed labours, and Waring's first movement was one of satisfaction. He threw down the book, with an apology for having ever taken it up in the half-ashamed, half-violent way in which he got rid of it. Don't suppose I care for such rubbish, his gesture seemed to say. But the aspect of Mr.

Durant changed his look of welcome. He rose hurriedly, and gave his visitor a chair. 'You are early out,' he said.

'Yes; the morning, I find, is the best time. Even after the sun is down, it is never so fresh in the evening. Especially for business, I find it the best time.'

'That means, I suppose,' said Waring, 'that your visit this morning means business, and not mere friendship, as I had supposed?'

'Friendship always, I hope,' said the tidy old clergyman, smoothing his hat with his hand; 'but I don't deny it is something more serious: a—a— question I want to ask you, if you don't mind——'

Just at this moment, in the next room there rose a little momentary and pleasant clamour of voices and youthful laughter; two voices certainly—Frances and another. This made Mr. Durant prick up his ears. 'You have—visitors?' he said.

'Yes. I will answer to the best of my ability,' said Waring, with a smile.

Now was the time when Mr Durant realised the difficult nature of his mission. At home in his own house, especially in the midst of the consensus of opinion, with everybody encouraging him and pressing upon him the fact that it was 'a duty,' the matter seemed easy enough. But when he found himself in Waring's house, looking a man in the face with whose concerns he had really no right to interfere, and who had not at all the air of a man ready to be brought to the confessional, Mr. Durant's confidence failed him. He faltered a little; he looked at his very unlikely penitent, and then he looked at the hat which he was turning round in his hands, but which gave him no courage. Then he cleared his throat. 'The question is—quite a simple one.' he said. 'There can be no doubt of your ability—to answer. I am sure you will forgive me if I say, to begin with——'

'One moment. Is this question—which seems to trouble you—about my affairs or yours?'

Mr. Durant's clear complexion betrayed something like a flush. 'That is just what I want to explain. You will acknowledge, my dear Waring, that you have been received here—well, there is not very much in our power—

but with every friendly feeling, every desire to make you one of us.'

'All this preface shows me that it is I who have been found wanting. You are quite right; you have been most hospitable and kind—to myself, almost too much so; to my daughter, you have given all the society she has ever known.'

'I am glad, truly glad, that you think we have done our part. My dear friend, was it right, then, when we opened our arms to you so unsuspectingly, to come among us in a false character—under false colours?'

'Stop!' said Waring, growing pale. 'This is going a little too far. I suppose I understand what you mean. Mannering, who calls himself my old friend, has been here; and as he could not hold his tongue if his life depended upon it, he has told you—— But why you should accuse me of holding a false position, of coming under false colours—which was what you said——'

'Waring!' said the clergyman, in a voice of mild thunder, 'did you never think, when you came here, comparatively a young, and—well, still a good-looking man—did you never think that there might be some susceptible heart—some woman's heart——'

'Good heavens!' cried Waring, starting to his feet, 'I never supposed for a moment——'

'——Some young creature,' Mr. Durant continued solemnly, 'whom it might be my duty and your duty to guard from deception; but who naturally, taking you for a widower——'

Waring's countenance of horror was unspeakable. He stood up before his table like a little boy who was about to be caned. Exclamations of dismay fell unconsciously from his lips. 'Sir! I never thought——'

Mr. Durant paused to contemplate with pleasure the panic he had caused. He put down his hat and rubbed together his little fat white hands. 'By the blessing of Providence,' he said, drawing a long breath, 'that danger has been averted. I say it with thankfulness. We have been preserved from any such terrible result. But had things been differently ordered—think, only think! and be grateful to Providence.'

The answer which Waring made to this speech was to burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. He seemed incapable of recovering his gravity. As soon as he paused, exhausted, to draw breath, he was off again. The suggestion, when it ceased to be horrible, became ludicrous beyond description. He quavered forth 'I beg your pardon' between the fits, which Mr. Durant did not at all like. He sat looking on at the hilarity very gravely without a smile.

'I did not expect so much levity,' he said.

'I beg your pardon,' cried the culprit, with tears running down his cheeks. 'Forgive me. If you will recollect that the character of a gay Lothario is the last one in the world——'

'It is not necessary to be a gay Lothario,' returned the clergyman. 'Really, if this is to continue, it will be better that I should withdraw. Laughter was the last thing I intended to produce.'

'It is not a bad thing, and it is not an indulgence I am given to. But I think, considering what a very terrible alternative you set before me, we may be very glad it has ended in laughter. Mr. Durant,' continued Waring, 'you have only anticipated an explanation I intended to make. Mannering is an ass.'

'I am sure he is a most respectable member of society,' said Mr. Durant, with much gravity.

'So are many asses. I have some one else to present to you, who is very unlike Mannering, but who betrays me still more distinctly. Constance, I want you here.'

The old clergyman gazed, not believing his eyes, as there suddenly appeared in the doorway the tall figure of a girl who had never been seen as yet in Bordighera—a girl who was very simply dressed, yet who had an air which the old gentleman—acquainted, as he flattered himself, with the air of fine people—could not ignore. She stood with a careless grace, returning slightly, not without a little of that impertinence of a fine lady which is so impressive to the crowd, his salutation. 'Did you want me, papa?' she quietly asked.

## CHAPTER X

THE revelation which thus burst upon Mr. Durant was known throughout the length and breadth of Bordighera, as that good man said, before the day was out. The expression was not so inappropriate as might be at first supposed, considering the limited society to which the fact that Mr. Waring had a second daughter was of any particular interest; for the good chaplain's own residence was almost at the extremity of the Marina, and General Gaunt's on the highest point of elevation among the olive gardens; while the only other English inhabitants were in the hotels near the beach, and consisted of a landlady, a housekeeper, and the highly respectable person who had charge of the stables at the Bellevue. This little inferior world was respectfully interested but not excited by the new arrival.

But to Mrs. Durant and Tasie it was an event of the first importance; and Mrs. Gaunt was at first disposed to believe that it was a revelation of further wickedness, and that there was no telling where these discoveries might end. 'We shall be hearing that he has a son next,' she said. They had a meeting in the afternoon to talk it over; and it really did appear at first that the new disclosure enhanced the enormity of the first—for, naturally, the difference between a widower and a married man is aggravated by the discovery that the deceiver pretending to have only one child has really 'a family.' At the first glance the ladies were all impressed by this; though afterwards, when they began to think of it, they were obliged to admit that the conclusion perhaps was not very well founded. And when it turned out that Frances and the new-comer were twins, that altogether altered the question, and left them, though they were by no means satisfied, without anything further to say.

While all this went on outside the Palazzo, there was much going on within it that was calculated to produce difficulty and embarrassment. Mr. Waring, with a consciousness that he was acting a somewhat cowardly part, ran away from it altogether, and shut himself up in his library, and left his daughters to make acquaintance with each other as they best could. He was, as has been said, by no means sufficiently at his ease to return to what he called his studies, the ordinary occupations of his life. He had run away, and he knew it. He went so far as to turn the key in one door, so that, whatever happened, he could only be invaded from one side, and sat down uneasily in the full conviction that from moment to moment he might be called upon to act as interpreter or peacemaker, or to explain away difficulties. He did not understand women, but only his wife, from whom he had taken various prejudices on the subject; neither did he understand girls, but only Frances, whom, indeed, he ought to have known better than to suppose, either that she was likely to squabble with her sister, or call him in to mediate or explain. Frances was not at all likely to do either of these things; and he knew that, yet lived in a vague dread, and did not even sit comfortably on his chair, and tried to distract his mind with a novel—which was the condition in which he was found by Mr. Durant. The clergyman's visit did him a little good, giving him at once a grievance and an object of ridicule. During the rest of the day he was so far distracted from his real difficulties as to fall from time to time into fits of secret laughter over the idea of having been in all unconsciousness a source of danger for Tasie. He had never been a gay Lothario, as he said; but to have run the risk of destroying Tasie's peace of mind was beyond his wildest imagination. He longed to confide it to somebody, but there was no one with whom he could share the fun. Constance perhaps might have understood; but Frances! He relapsed into gravity when he thought of Frances. It was not the kind of ludicrous suggestion which would amuse her.

Meanwhile the girls, who were such strangers to each other, yet so closely bound by nature, were endeavouring to come to a knowledge of each other by means which were much more subtle than any explanation their father could have supplied; so that he might, if he had understood them better, have been entirely at his ease on this point. As a matter of fact, though Constance was the cleverer of the two, it was Frances who advanced most quickly in her investigations, for the excellent reason that it was Constance who talked, while Frances, for the most part having nothing at all interesting to say of herself, held her peace. Frances had been awakened at an unusually late hour in the morning—for the agitation of the night had abridged her sleep at the other end—by the sounds of mirth which accompanied the first dialogue between her new sister and Mariuccia. The Italian which Constance knew was limited, but it was of a finer quality than any with which Mariuccia was acquainted; yet still they came to some sort of understanding, and both repudiated the efforts of Frances to explain. And from that moment Constance had kept the conversation in her hands. She did not chatter, nor was there any appearance of loquacity in her; but Frances had lived much alone, and had been taught not to disturb her father when she was with him, so that it was more her habit to be talked to than to talk. She did not even ask many questions—they were scarcely necessary; for Constance, as was natural, was full of herself and of her motives for the step she had taken. These revelations gave Frances new lights almost at every word.

'You always knew, then, about—us?' Frances said. She had intended to say 'about me,' but refrained, with mingled modesty and pride.

'Oh, certainly. Mamma always writes, you know, at Christmas, if not oftener. We did not know you were here. It was Markham who found out that. Markham is the most active-minded fellow in the world. Papa does not much like him. I daresay you have never heard anything very favourable of him; but that is a mistake. We knew pretty well about you. Mamma used to ask that you should write, since there was no reason why, at your age, you should not speak for yourself; but you never did. I suppose he thought it better not.'

'I suppose so.'

'I should not myself have been restrained by that,' said Constance. 'I think very well on the whole of papa; but obedience of that sort at our age is too much. I should not have obeyed him. I should have told him that in such a matter I must judge for myself. However, if one learns anything as one grows up,' said this young philosopher, 'it is that no two people are alike. I suppose that was not how the subject presented itself to you?'

Frances made no reply. She wondered what she would have said had she been told to write to an unknown mother.

Ought she to do so now? The idea was a very strange one to her mind, and yet what could be more natural? It was with a sense of precipitate avoidance of a subject which must be contemplated fully at an after-period, that she said hurriedly, 'I have never written letters. It did not come into my head.'

'Ah!' said Constance, looking at her with a sort of impartial scrutiny. Then she added, with a sequence of thoughts which it was not difficult to follow, 'Don't you think it is very odd that you and I should be the same age?'

Frances felt herself grow red, and the water came to her eyes. She looked wistfully at the other, who was so much more advanced than she felt herself to be. 'I suppose—we ought to have been like each other,' she said.

'We are not, however, a bit. You are like mamma. I don't know whether you are like her in mind—but on the outside. And I am like *him.* It is very funny. It shows that one has these peculiarities from one's birth; it couldn't be habit or association, as people say, for I have never been with him—neither have you with mamma. I suppose he is very independent-minded, and does what he likes without thinking? So do I. And you consider what other people will say, and how it will look, and a thousand things.'

It did not seem to Frances that this was the case; but she was not at all in the habit of studying herself, and made no protest. Did she consider very much what other people would say? Perhaps it was true. She had been obliged, she reflected, to consider what Mariuccia would say; so that probably Constance was right.

'It was Markham that discovered you, after all, as I told you. He is invaluable; he never forgets; and if you want to find anything out, he will take any amount of trouble. I may as well tell you why I left home. If we are going to live together as sisters, we ought to make confidants of each other; and if you have to go, you can take my part. Well, then! You must know there is a man in it. They say you should always ask, "Who is She?" when there is a row between men; and I am sure it is just as natural to ask, "Who is He?" when a girl gets into a scrape.'

The language, the tone, the meaning, were all new to

Frances. She did not know anything about it. When there is a row between men; when a girl gets into a scrape: the one and the other were equally far from her experience. She felt herself blush, though she scarcely knew why. She shook her head when Constance added, though rather as a remark than as a question, 'Don't you know? Oh, well; I did not mean, have you any personal experience, but as a general principle? The man in this case was well enough. Papa said, when I told him, that it was quite right; that I had better have made up my mind without making a fuss; that he would have advised me so, if he had known. But I will never allow that this is a point upon which any one can judge for you. Mamma pressed me more than a mother has any right to do—to a person of my age.'

'But, Constance, eighteen is not so very old.'

'Eighteen is the age of reason,' said the girl, somewhat imperiously; then she paused and added—'in most cases, when one has been much in the world, like me. Besides, it is like the middle ages when your mother thinks she can make you do what she pleases and marry as she likes. That must be one's own affair. I must say that I thought papa would take my part more strongly, for they have always been so much opposed. But after all, though he is not in harmony with her, still the parents' side is his side.'

'Did you not like—the gentleman?' said Frances. Nothing could be more modest than this question, and yet it brought the blood to her face. She had never heard the ordinary *badinage* on this subject, or thought of love with anything but awe and reverence, as a mystery altogether beyond her and out of discussion. She did not look at her sister as she put the question. Constance lay back in the long wicker-work chair, well lined with cushions, which was her father's favourite seat, with her hands clasped behind her head, in one of those attitudes of complete *abandon* which Frances had been trained to think impossible to a girl.

'Did I like—the gentleman? I did not think that question could ever again be put to me in an original way. I see now what is the good of a sister. Mamma and Markham and all my people had such a different way of looking at it. You must know that *that* is not the first question, whether you like the man. As for that, I liked him—well enough. There was nothing to—dislike in him.'

Frances turned her eyes to her sister's face with something like reproach. 'I may not have used the right word. I have never spoken on such subjects before.'

'I have always been told that men are dreadful prudes,' said Constance. 'I suppose papa has brought you up to think that such things must never be spoken of. I'll tell you what is original about it. I have been asked if he was not rich enough, if he was not handsome enough, if it was because he had no title: and I have been asked if I loved him, which was nonsense. I could answer all that; but you I can't answer. Don't I like him? I was not going to be persecuted about him. It was Markham who put this into my head. "Why don't you go to your father," he said, "if you won't hear reason? He is just the sort of person to understand you, if we don't." So, then, I took them at their word. I came off—to papa.'

'Does Markham dislike papa? I mean, doesn't he think——'

'I know what you mean. They don't think that papa has good sense. They think him romantic, and all that. I have always been accustomed to think so too. But the curious thing is that he isn't,' said Constance, with an injured air. 'I suppose, however foolish one's father may be for himself, he still feels that he must stand on the parents' side.'

'You speak,' said Frances, with a little indignation, 'as if papa was likely to be against—his children; as if he were an enemy.'

'Taking sides is not exactly being enemies,' said Constance. 'We are each of our own faction, you know. It is like Whigs and Tories. The fathers and mothers side with each other, even though they may be quite different and not get on together. There is a kind of reason in it. Only, I have always heard so much of papa as unreasonable and unlike other people, that I never thought of him in that light. He would be just the same, though, except that for the present I am a stranger, and he feels bound to be civil to me. If it were not for his politeness, he is capable of being medieval too.'

'I don't know what medieval means,' said Frances, with much heat, indignant to hear her father thus spoken of as a subject for criticism. Perhaps she had criticised him in her time, as children use—but silently, not putting it into words, which makes a great difference. And besides, what one does one's self in this way is quite another matter. As she looked at this girl, who was a stranger, though in some extraordinary way not a stranger, a momentary pang and impotent sudden rage against the web of strange circumstances in which she felt herself caught and bewildered, flamed up in her mild eyes and mind, unaccustomed to complications. Constance took no notice of this sudden passion.

'It means bread and water,' she said, with a laugh, 'and shutting up in one's own room, and cutting off of all communication from without. Mamma, if she were driven to it, is quite capable of that. They all are—rather than give in; but as we are not living in the middle ages, they have to give in at last. Perhaps, if I had thought that what you may call his official character would be too strong for papa, I should have fought it out at home. But I thought he at least would be himself, and not a conventional parent. I am sure he has been a very queer sort of parent hitherto; but the moment a fight comes, he puts himself on his own side.'

She gave forth these opinions very calmly, lying back in the long chair, with her hands clasped behind her head, and her eyes following abstractedly the lines of the French coast. The voice which uttered sentiments so strange to Frances was of the most refined and harmonious tones, low, soft, and clear. And the lines of her slim elastic figure, and of her perfectly appropriate dress, which combined simplicity and costliness, carelessness and consummate care, as only high art can, added to the effect of a beauty which was not beauty in any demonstrative sense, but rather harmony, ease, grace, fine health, fine training, and what, for want of a better word, we call blood. Not that the bluest blood in the world inevitably carries with it this perfection of tone; but Constance had the effect which a thoroughbred horse has upon the connoisseur. It would have detracted from the impression she made had there been any special point upon which the attention lingered—had her eyes, or her complexion, her hands, or her hair, or any individual trait, called for particular notice. But hers was not beauty of that description.

Her sister, who was, so to speak, only a little rustic, sat and gazed at her in a kind of rapture. Her heart did not, as yet at least, go out towards this intruder into her life; her affections were as yet untouched; and her temper was a little excited, disturbed by the critical tone which her sister assumed, and the calm frankness with which she spoke. But though all these dissatisfied, almost hostile sentiments were in Frances' mind, her eyes and attention were fascinated. She could not resist the influence which this external perfection of being produced upon her. It was only perhaps now in the full morning light, in the *abandon* of this confidence and candour, which had none of the usual tenderness of confidential revelations, but rather a certain half-disdainful self-discovery which necessity demanded, that Frances fully perceived her sister's gifts. Her own impatience, her little impulses of irritation and contradiction, died away in the wondering admiration with which she gazed. Constance showed no sign even of remarking the effect she produced. She said meditatively, dropping the words into the calm air without any apparent conception of novelty or wonder in them, 'I wonder how you will like it when you have to go.'

## CHAPTER XI

WITHIN the first few days, a great many of these conversations took place, and Frances gradually formed an idea to herself—not, perhaps, very like reality, but yet an idea—of the other life from which her sister had come. The chief figure in it was 'mamma,' the mother with whom Constance was so carelessly familiar, and of whom she herself knew nothing at all. Frances did not learn from her sister's revelations to love her mother. The effect was very different from that which, in such circumstances, might have been looked for. She came to look upon this unknown representative of 'the parents' side,' as Constance said, as upon a sort of natural opponent, one who understood but little and sympathised not at all with the younger, the other faction, the generation which was to succeed and replace her. Of this fact the other girl never concealed her easy conviction. The elders for the moment had the power in their hands, but by and by their day would be over. There was nothing unkind or cruel in this certainty; it was simply the course of nature: by and by their sway would be upset by the natural progress of events, and in the meantime it was modified by the other certainty, that if the young stood firm, the elders had no alternative but to give in. Altogether, it was evident the parents' side was not the winning side; but all the same it had the power of annoying the other to a very great extent, and exercised this power with a selfishness which was sometimes brutal. Mamma, it was evident, had not considered Constance at all. She had taken her about into society for her own ends, not for her daughter's pleasure: and, finally, she had formed a plan by which Constance was to be handed over to another proprietor without any consultation of her own wishes.

The heart of Frances sank as she slowly identified this maternal image, so different from that which fancy and nature suggest. She tried to compare it with the image which she herself might in her turn have communicated of her father, had it been she who was the expositor. It frightened her to find, as she tried this experiment in her own mind, that the representation of papa would not have been much more satisfactory. She would have shown him as passing his time chiefly in his library, taking very little notice of her tastes and wishes, settling what was to be done, where to go, everything that was of any importance in their life, without at all taking into account what she wished. This she had always felt to be perfectly natural, and she had no feeling of a grievance in the matter; but supposing it to be necessary to tell the story to an ignorant person, what would that ignorant person's opinion be? It gave her a great shock to perceive that the impression produced would also be one of harsh authority, indifferent, taking no note of the inclinations of those who were subject to it. That was how Constance would understand papa. It was not the case, and yet it would look so to one who did not know. Perceiving this, Frances came to feel that it might be natural to represent the world as consisting of two factions, parents and children. There was a certain truth in it. If there should happen to occur any question—which was impossible—

between papa and herself, she felt sure that it would be very difficult for him to realise that she had a will of her own; and yet Frances was very conscious of having a will of her own.

In this way she learned a great many things vaguely through the talk of her sister. She learned that balls and other entertainments, such as, to her inexperienced fancy, had seemed nothing but pleasure, were not in reality intended, at least as their first object, for pleasure at all. Constance spoke of them as things to which one must go. 'We looked in for an hour,' she would say. 'Mamma thinks she ought to have have half a dozen places to go to every evening,' with a tone in which there was more sense of injury than pleasure. Then there was the mysterious question of love, which was at once so simple and so awful a matter, on which there could be no doubt or question: that, it appeared, was quite a complicated affair, in which the lover, the hero, was transferred into 'the man,' whose qualities had to be discovered and considered, as if he were a candidate for a public office. All this bewildered Frances more than can be imagined or described. Her sister's arrival, and the disclosures involved in it, had broken up to her all the known lines of heaven and earth; and now that everything had settled down again, and these lines were beginning once more to be apparent, Frances felt that though they were wider, they were narrower too. She knew a great deal more; but knowledge only made that appear hard and unyielding which had been elastic and infinite. The vague and imaginary were a great deal more lovely than this, which, according to her sister's revelation, was the real and true.

Another very curious experience for Frances occurred when Mrs. Durant and Mrs. Gaunt, as in duty bound, and moved with lively curiosity, came to call and make acquaintance with Mr. Waring's new daughter. Constance regarded these visitors with languid curiosity, only half rising from her chair to acknowledge her introduction to them, and leaving Frances to answer the questions which they thought it only civil to put. Did she like Bordighera?

'Oh yes; well enough,' Constance replied.

'My sister thinks the people not so picturesque as she expected,' said Frances.

'But of course she felt the delightful difference in the climate?' People, Mrs. Durant understood, were suffering dreadfully from east wind in London.

'Ah! one doesn't notice in town,' said Constance.

'My sister is not accustomed to living without comforts and with so little furniture. You know that makes a great difference,' said her anxious expositor and apologist.

And then there would ensue a long pause, which the new-comer did nothing at all to break: and then the conversation fell into the ordinary discussion of who was at church on Sunday, how many new people from the hotels, and how disgraceful it was that some who were evidently English should either poke into the Roman Catholic places or never go to church at all.

'It comes to the same thing, indeed,' Mrs. Durant said indignantly; 'for when they go to the native place of worship, they don't understand. Even I, that have been so long on the Continent, I can't follow the service.'

'But papa can,' said Tasie.

'Ah, papa—papa is much more highly educated than I could ever pretend to be; and besides, he is a theologian, and knows. There were quite half a dozen people, evidently English, whom I saw with my own eyes coming out of the chapel on the Marina. Oh, don't say anything, Tasie! I think, in a foreign place, where the English have a character to keep up, it is quite a sin.'

'You know, mamma, they think nobody knows them,' Tasie said.

Mrs. Gaunt did not care so much who attended church; but when she found that Constance had, as she told the General, 'really nothing to say for herself,' she too dropped into her habitual mode of talk. She did her best in the first place to elicit the opinions of Constance about Bordighera and the climate, about how she thought Mr. Waring looking, and if dear Frances was not far stronger than she used to be. But when these judicious inquiries failed of a response, Mrs. Gaunt almost turned her back upon Constance. 'I have had a letter from Katie, my dear,' she said.

'Have you indeed? I hope she is quite well—and the babies?'

'Oh, the babies; they are always well. But poor Katie, she has been a great sufferer. I told you she had a touch of fever, by last mail. Now it is her liver. You are never safe from your liver in India. She had been up to the hills, and there she met Douglas, who had gone to settle his wife and children. His wife is a poor little creature, always ailing; and their second boy—— But, dear me, I have not told you my great news! Frances—George is coming home! he is coming by Brindisi and Venice, and will be here directly. I told him I was sure all my kind neighbours would be so glad to see him; and it will be so nice for him—don't you think?—to see Italy on his way.'

'Oh, very nice,' said Frances. 'And you must be very happy, both the General and you.'

'The General does not say much, but he is just as happy as I am. Fancy! by next mail! in another week!' The poor lady dried her eyes, and added, laughing, sobbing, 'Only think—in a week—my youngest boy!'

'Do you mean to say,' said Constance, when Mrs. Gaunt was gone, 'that you have made them believe you care? Oh, that is exactly like mamma. She makes people think she is quite happy and quite miserable about their affairs, when she does not care one little bit! What is this woman's youngest son to you?'

'But she is—— I have been here all my life. I am glad that she should be happy,' cried Frances, suddenly placed upon her defence.

When she thought of it, Mrs. Gaunt's youngest boy was nothing at all to her; nor did she care very much whether all the English in the hotels on the Marina went to church. But Mrs. Gaunt was interested in the one, and the Durants in the other. And was it true what Constance said, that she was a humbug, that she was a deceiver, because she pretended to care? Frances was much confused by this question. There was something in it: perhaps it was true. She faltered as she replied, 'Do you think it is wrong to sympathise? It is true that I don't feel all that for myself. But still it is not false, for I do feel it for them—in a sort of a way.'

'And that is all the society you have here? the clergywoman and the old soldier. And will they expect me, too, to feel for them—in a sort of a way?'

'Dear Constance,' said Frances, in a pleading tone, 'it could never be quite the same, you know; because you are a stranger, and I have known them ever since I was quite a little thing. They have all been very kind to me. They used to have me to tea; and Tasie would play with me; and Mrs. Gaunt brought down all her Indian curiosities to amuse me. Oh, you don't know how kind they are! I wonder, sometimes, when I see all the carved ivory things, and remember how they were taken out from under the glass shades for me, a little thing, how I didn't break them, and how dear Mrs. Gaunt could trust me with them! And then Tasie——'

'Tasie! What a ridiculous name! But it suits her well enough. She must be forty, I should think.'

'Her right name is Anastasia. She is called after the Countess of Denrara, who is her godmother,' said Frances, with great gravity. She had heard this explanation a great many times from Mrs. Durant, and unconsciously repeated it in something of the same tone. Constance received this with a sudden laugh, and clapped her hands.

'I didn't know you were a mimic. That is capital. Do Tasie now. I am sure you can; and then we shall have got a laugh out of them at least.'

'What do you mean?' asked Frances, growing pale. 'Do you think I would laugh at them? When you know how really good they are——'

'Oh yes; I suppose I shall soon know,' said Constance, opening her mouth in a yawn, which Frances thought would have been dreadful in any one else, but which, somehow, was rather pretty in her. Everything was rather pretty in her, even her little rudenesses and impertinences. 'If I stay here, of course I shall have to be intimate with them, as you have been. And must I take a tender interest in the youngest boy? Let us see! He will be a young soldier probably, as his mother is an old one, and as he is coming from India. He will never have seen any one. He is bound to take one of us for a goddess, either you or me.'

'Constance!' cried Frances, in her consternation raising her voice.

'Well,' said her sister, 'is there anything wonderful in that?

We are very different types, and till we see the hero, we shall not be able to tell which he is likely to prefer. I see my way to a little diversion, if you will not be too puritanical, Fan. That never does a man any harm. It will rouse him up; it will give him something to think of. A place like this can't have much amusement, even for a youngest boy. We shall make him enjoy himself. His mother will bless us. You know, everybody says it is part of education for a man.'

Frances looked at her sister with eyes bewildered, somewhat horrified, full of disapproval; while Constance, roused still more by her sister's horror than by the first mischievous suggestion which had awakened her from her indifference, laughed, and woke up into full animation. 'We will go and return their visits,' she said, 'and I will be sympathetic too. But you shall see, when I take up a part, I make much more of it than you do. I know who these people were who did not go to church. They were my people—the people I travelled with; and they shall go next Sunday, and Tasie's heart shall rejoice. When we call, I will let them know that England, even at Bordighera, expects ever man—and every woman, which is more to the purpose—and that their absence was remarked. They will never be absent again, Fan. And as for the other interest, I shall inquire all about K[illegible] kindnesses, and secure the very last intelligence about the youngest boy. She will show me his photograph. She will tell me stories of how he cut his first tooth. I won[illegible] Constance, suddenly pausing and falling back into the languid tone, 'whether you will take up my old w[illegible] you are with mamma.'

'I shall never have it in my power to tr[illegible] 'Mamma will never want me.' She was a little s[illegible] that name.

'Don't you know the condition, then? I thin[illegible] half know our story. Papa behaved rather absurd[illegible]estly too. When they separated, he settled that one of us should always be with her, and one of us with him. He [illegible] the right to have taken us both. Men have more [illegible] women. We belong to him, but we don't belong [illegible] don't see the reason of it, but still that is law. [illegible] her to have one of us always. I daresay he thoug[illegible] things like what we were then would have been a bore to him. At all events, that is how it was settled. Now it does not need much cleverness to see, that as I have left her, she will probably claim you. She will not let papa off anything he has promised. She likes a girl in the house. She will say, "Send me Frances." I should like to hide behind a door or under a table, and see how you get on.'

'I am sure you must be mistaken,' said Frances, much disturbed; 'there was never any question about me.'

'No; because I was there. Oh yes; there was often question of you. Mamma has a little picture of you as you were when you were taken away. It always hangs in her room; and when I had to be scolded, she used to apostrophise you. She used to say, "That little angel would never have done so-and-so." I did, for I was a little demon; so I rather hated you. She will send for you now; and I wonder if you will be a little angel still. I should like to see how you get on. But I shall be fully occupied here driving people to church, and making things pleasant for the old soldier's youngest son.'

'I wish you would not talk so wildly,' said Frances. 'You are laughing at me all the time. You think I am such a simpleton, I will believe all you say. And indeed I am not clever enough to understand when you are laughing at me. All this is impossible. That I should take your place, and at you should take mine—oh, impossible!' cried Frances, h a sharper certainty than ever, as that last astounding idea [illegible] itself apparent: that Constance should order papa's [illegible] and see after the mayonnaise, and guide Mariuccia— [illegible]!' she cried.

[illegible] it's impossible.' 'You think I am not good enough [illegible] the housekeeping for papa. I only hope you will *feel* [illegible] of the difficulties of my place, as I shall of yours. Be a d girl, and write to me, and tell me how things go. I ow what will happen. You will think everything charming irst; and then—— But don't let Markham get hold of [illegible] Markham is very nice. He is capital for getting you [illegible] of a scrape; but still, I should not advise you to be [illegible]d by him, especially as you are papa's child, and he is [illegible] fond of papa.'

'Please don't say any more,' cried Frances. 'I am not going—anywhere. I shall live as I have always done; but only more pleasantly from having—you.'

'That is very pretty of you,' said Constance, turning round to look at her; 'if you are sure you mean it, and that it is not only true—in a sort of a way. I am afraid I have been nothing but a bore, breaking in upon you like this. It would be nice if we could be together,' she added, very calmly, as if, however, no great amount of philosophy would be necessary to reconcile her to the absence of her sister. 'It would be nice; but it will not be allowed. You needn't be afraid, though, for I can give you a number of hints which will make it much easier. Mamma is a little—she is just a little—but I should think you would get on with her. You look so young for one thing. She will begin your education over again, and she likes that; and then you are like her, which will give you a great pull. It is very funny to think of it; it is like a transformation scene; but I daresay we shall both get on a great deal better than you think. For my part, I never was the least afraid.'

With this, Constance sank into her chair again, and resumed the book she had been reading, with that perfect composure and indifference which filled Frances with admiration and dismay.

It was with difficulty that Frances herself kept her seat or her self-command at all. She had been drawing, making one of those innumerable sketches which could be made from the loggia; now of a peak among the mountains; now of the edge of foam on the blue, blue margin of the sea; now of an olive, now of a palm. Frances had a consistent conscientious way of besieging Nature, forcing her day by day to render up the secret of another tint, another shadow. It was thus she had come to the insight which had made her father acknowledge that she was 'growing up.' But to-day her hand had no cunning. Her pulses beat so tumultuously that her pencil shared the agitation, and fluttered too. She kept still as long as she could, and spoiled a piece of paper, which to Frances, with very little money to lose, was something to be thought of. And when she had accomplished this, and added to her excitement the disagreeable and confusing effect of failure in what she was doing, Frances got up abruptly and took refuge in the household concerns, in directions about the dinner, and consultations with Mariuccia, who was beginning to be a little jealous of the signorina's absorption in her new companion. 'If the young lady is indeed your sister, it is natural she should have a great deal of your attention; but not even for that does one desert one's old friends,' Mariuccia said, with a little offended dignity.

Frances felt, with a sinking of the heart, that her sister's arrival had been to her perhaps less an unmixed pleasure than to any of the household. But she did not say so. She made no exhibition of the trouble in her bosom, which even the consultations over the mayonnaise did not allay. That familiar duty indeed soothed her for the moment. The question was whether it should be made with chicken or fish—a very important matter. But though this did something to relieve her, the culinary effort did not last. To think of being sent away into that new world in which Constance had been brought up—to leave everything she knew—to meet 'mamma,' whose name she whispered to herself almost trembling, feeling as if she took a liberty with a stranger,—all this was bewildering, wonderful, and made her heart beat and her head ache. It was not altogether that the anticipation was painful. There was a flutter of excitement in it which was almost delight; but it was an alarmed delight, which shook her nerves as much as if it had been unmixed terror. She could not compose herself into indifference as Constance did, or sit quietly down to think, or resume her usual occupation, in the face of this sudden opening out before her of the unforeseen and unknown.

## CHAPTER XII

THE days ran on for about a week with a suppressed and agitating expectation in them, which seemed to Frances to blur and muddle all the outlines, so that she could not recollect which was Wednesday or which was Friday, but felt it all one uncomfortable long feverish sort of day. She could not take the advantage of any pleasure there might be in them—and it was a pleasure to watch Constance, to hear her talk, to catch the many glimpses of so different a life, which came from the careless, easy monologue which was her style of conversation—for the exciting sense that she did not know what might happen at any moment, or what was going to become of her. Even the change from her familiar place at table, which Constance took without any thought, just as she took her father's favourite chair on the loggia, and the difference in her room, helped to confuse her mind, and add to the feverish sensation of a life altogether out of joint.

Constance had not observed any of those signs of individual habitation about the room which Frances had fancied would lead to a discovery of the transfer she had made. She took it quite calmly, not perceiving anything beyond the ordinary in the chamber which Frances had adorned with her sketches, with the little curiosities she had picked up, with all the little collections of her short life. It was wanting still in many things which to Constance seemed simple necessities. How was she to know how many were in it which were luxuries to that primitive locality? She remained altogether unconscious, accordingly, of the sacrifice her sister had made for her, and spoke lightly of poor Frances' pet decorations; and of the sketches, the authorship of which she did not take the trouble to suspect. 'What funny little pictures!' she had said. 'Where did you get so many odd little things? They look as if the frames were home-made, as well as the drawings.'

Fortunately she was not in the habit of waiting for an answer to such a question, and she did not remark the colour that rose to her sister's cheeks. But all this added to the disturbing influence, and made these long days look unlike any other days in Frances' life. She took the other side of the table meekly with a half-smile at her father, warning him not to say anything; and she lived in the blue room without thinking of adding to its comforts—for what was the use, so long as this possible banishment hung over her head? Life seemed to be arrested during these half dozen days. They had the mingled colours and huddled outlines of a spoiled drawing; they were not like anything else in her life, neither the established calm and certainty that went before, nor the strange novelty that followed after.

There were no confidences between her father and herself

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during this period. Since their conversation on the night of Constance's arrival, not a word had been said between them on the subject. They mutually avoided all occasion for further talk. At least Mr. Waring avoided it, not knowing how to meet his child, or to explain to her the hazard to which her life was exposed. He did not take into consideration the attraction of the novelty, the charm of the unknown mother and the unknown life, at which Frances permitted herself to take tremulous and stealthy glimpses as the days went on. He contemplated her fate from his own point of view as something like that of the princess who was doomed to the dragon's maw but for the never-to-be-forgotten interposition of St. George, that emblem of chivalry. There was no St. George visible on the horizon, and Waring thought the dragon no bad emblem of his wife. And he was ashamed to think that he was helpless to deliver her; and that, by his fault, this poor little Una, this hapless Andromeda, was to be delivered over to the waiting monster.

He avoided Frances, because he did not know how to break to her this possibility, or how, since Constance probably had made her aware of it, to console her in the terrible crisis at which she had arrived. It was a painful crisis for himself as well as for her. The first evening on which, coming into the loggia to smoke his cigarette after dinner, he had found Constance extended in his favourite chair, had brought this fully home to him. He strolled out upon the open-air room with all the ease of custom, and for the first moment he did not quite understand what it was that was changed in it, that put him out, and made him feel as if he had come, not into his own familiar domestic centre, but somebody else's place. He hung about for a minute or two, confused, before he saw what it was; and then, with a half-laugh in his throat, and a mingled sense that he was annoyed, and that it was ridiculous to be annoyed, strolled across the loggia, and half seated himself on the outer wall, leaning against a pillar. He was astonished to think how much disconcerted he was, and with what a comical sense of injury he saw his daughter lying back so entirely at her ease in his chair. She was his daughter, but she was a stranger, and it was impossible to tell her that her place was not there. Next evening he was almost angry, for he thought that Frances might have told her though he could not. And indeed Frances had done what she could to warn her sister of the usurpation. But Constance had no idea of vested rights of this description, and had paid no attention. She took very little notice, indeed, of what was said to her, unless it arrested her attention in some special way; and she had never been trained to understand that the master of a house has sacred privileges. She had not so much as known what it is to have a master to a house.

This and other trifles of the same kind gave to Waring something of the same confused and feverish feeling which was in the mind of Frances. And there hung over him a cloud as of something further to come, which was not so clear as her anticipations, yet was full of discomfort and apprehension. He thought of many things, not of one thing, as she did. It seemed to him not impossible that his wife herself might arrive some day as suddenly as Constance had done, to reclaim her child, or to take away his, for that was how they were distinguished in his mind. The idea of seeing again the woman from whom he had been separated so long, filled him with dread; and that she should come here and see the limited and recluse life he led, and his bare rooms, and his homely servants, filled him with a kind of horror. Rather anything than that. He did not like to contemplate even the idea that it might be necessary to give up the girl, who had flattered him by taking refuge with him and seeking his protection; but neither was the thought of being left with her and having Frances taken from him endurable. In short, his mind was in a state of mortal confusion and tumult. He was like the commander of a besieged city, not knowing on what day he might be summoned to surrender; not able to come to any conclusion whether it would be most wise to yield, or if the state of his resources afforded any feasible hopes of holding out.

Constance had been a week at the Palazzo before the trumpets sounded. The letters were delivered just before the twelve-o'clock breakfast; and Frances had received so much warning as this, that Mariuccia informed her there hap been a large delivery that morning. The signor padrone had a great packet; and there were also some letters for the other young lady, Signorina Constanza. 'But never any for thee, *carina*,' Mariuccia had said. The poor girl thus addressed had a momentary sense that she was indeed to be pitied on this account, before the excitement of the certainty that now something definite must be known as to what was to become of her, swelled her veins to bursting; and she felt herself grow giddy with the thought that what had been so vague and visionary, might now be coming near, and that in an hour or less she would know! Waring was as usual shut up in his bookroom; but she could see Constance on the loggia with her lap full of letters, lying back in the long chair as usual, reading them as if they were the most ordinary things in the world. Frances, for her part, had to wait in silence until she should learn from others what her fate was to be. It seemed very strange that one girl should be free to do so much, while another of the same age could do nothing at all.

Waring came into breakfast with the letters in his hand. 'I have heard from your mother,' he said, looking straight before him, without turning to the right or the left. Frances tried to appropriate this to herself, to make some reply, but her voice died in her throat; and Constance, with the easiest certainty that it was she who was addressed, answered before she could recover herself.

'Yes—so have I. Mamma is rather fond of writing letters. She says she has told you what she wishes, and then she tells me to tell you. I don't suppose that is of much use?'

'Of no use at all,' said he. 'She is pretty explicit. She says——'

Constance leant over the table a little, holding up her finger. 'Don't you think, papa, she said, 'as it is business, that it would be better not to enter upon it just now? Wait till we have had our breakfast.'

He looked at her with an air of surprise. 'I don't see——' he said; then, after a moment's reflection, 'Perhaps you are right, after all. It may be better not to say anything just now.'

Frances had recovered her voice. She looked from one to another as they spoke, with a cruel consciousness that it was she, not they, who was most concerned. At this point she burst forth with feelings not to be controlled. 'If it is on my account, I would rather know at once what it is,' she cried.

And then she had to bear the looks of both—her father's astonished half-remorseful gaze, and the eyes of Constance, which conveyed a warning. Why should Constance, who had told her of the danger, warn her now not to betray her knowledge of it? Frances had got beyond her own control: She was vexed by the looks which were fixed upon her, and by the supposed consideration for her comfort which lay in their delay. 'I know,' she said quickly, 'that it is something about me. If you think I care for breakfast, you are mistaken; but I think I have a right to know what it is, if it is about me. O papa, I don't mean to be—disagreeable,' she cried suddenly, sinking into her own natural tone as she caught his eye.

'That is not very much like you, certainly,' he said, in a confused voice.

'Evil communications,' said Constance, with a laugh. 'I have done her harm already.'

Frances felt that her sister's voice threw a new irritation into her mood. 'I am not like myself,' she said, 'because I know something is going to happen to me, and I don't know what it is. Papa, I don't want to be selfish, but let me know, please, only let me know what it is.'

'It is only that mamma has sent for you,' said Constance lightly; 'that is all. It is nothing so very dreadful. Now do let us have our breakfast in peace.'

'Is that true, papa?' Frances said.

'My dear little girl—I had meant to explain it all—to tell you—and I have been so silly as to put off. Your sister does not understand how we have lived together, Frances, you and I.'

'Am I to go, papa?'

He made a gesture of despair. 'I don't know what to do. I have given my promise. It is as bad for me as for you, Frances. But what am I to do?'

'I suppose,' said Constance, who had helped herself very tranquilly from the dish which Domènico had been holding unobserved at his master's elbow, 'that there is no law that could make you part with her, if you don't wish to. Promises are all very well with strangers; but they are never kept—are they?—between husband and wife. The father has all the right on his side, and you are not obliged to give either of us up. What a blessing,' she cried suddenly, 'to have servants who don't understand! That was why I said, don't talk of it till after breakfast. But it does not at all matter. It is as good as if he were deaf and dumb. Papa, you need not give her up unless you like.'

Waring looked at his daughter with mingled attention and anger. The suggestion was detestable, but yet——

'And then,' she went on, 'there is another thing. It might have been all very well when we were children; but now we are of an age to judge for ourselves. At eighteen, you can choose which you will stay with. Oh, younger than that. There have been several trials in the papers—no one can force Frances to go anywhere she does not like, at her age.'

'I wish,' he said, with a little irritation, restrained by politeness, for Constance was still a young-lady visitor to her father, 'that you would leave this question to be discussed afterwards. Your sister was right, Frances—after breakfast—after I have had a little time to think of it. I cannot come to any decision all at once.'

'That is a great deal better,' said Constance approvingly. 'One can't tell all in a moment. Frances is like mamma in that too. She requires you to know your own mind—to say Yes or No at once. You and I are very like each other, papa. I shall never hurry your decision, or ask you to settle a thing in a moment. But these cutlets are getting quite cold. Do have some before they are spoiled.'

Waring had no mind for the cutlets, to which he helped himself mechanically. He did not like to look at Frances, who sat silent, with her hands clasped on the table, pale but with a light in her eyes. The voice of Constance running on, forming a kind of veil for the trouble and confusion in his own mind, and doubtless in that of her sister, was half a relief and half an aggravation; he was grateful for it, yet irritated by it. He felt himself to play a very poor figure in the transaction altogether, as he had felt ever since she arrived. Frances, whom he had regarded as a child, had sprung up into a judge, into all the dignity of an injured person, whose right to complain of the usage to which she had been subjected no one could deny. And when he stole a furtive glance at her pale face, her head held high, the new light that burned in her eyes, he felt that she was fully aware of the wrong he had done her, and that it would not be so easy to dictate what she was to do, as everybody up to this moment had supposed. He saw, or thought he saw, resistance, indignation, in the gleam that had been awakened in Frances' dove's eyes. And his heart fell—yet rose also; for how could he constrain her, if she refused to go? He had no right to constrain her. Her mother might complain, but it would not be his doing. On the other side, it would be shameful, pitiful on his part to go back from his word—to acknowledge to his wife that he could not do what he had pledged himself to do.

In every way it was an uncomfortable breakfast, all the forms of which he followed, partly for the sake of Constance, partly for that of Domenico. But Frances ate nothing, he could see. He prolonged the meal, through a sort of fear of the interview afterwards, of what he must say to her, and of what she should reply. He felt ashamed of his reluctance to encounter this young creature, whom a few days ago he had smiled at as a child; and ashamed to look her in the face, to explain and argue with, and entreat, where he had been always used to tell her to do this and that, without the faintest fear that she would disobey him. If even he had been left to tell her himself of all the circumstances, to make her aware gradually of all that he had kept from her (for her good), to show her now how his word was pledged! But even this had been taken out of his hands.

All this time no one talked but Constance, who went on with an occasional remark and with her meal, for which she had a good appetite. 'I wish you would eat something, Frances,' she said. 'You need not begin to punish yourself at once. I feel it dreadfully, for it is all my fault. It is I who ought to lose my breakfast, not you. If you will take a few hints from me, I don't think you will find it so bad. Or perhaps, if we all lay our heads together, we may see some way out of it. Papa knows the law, and I know the English side, and you know what you think yourself. Let us talk it all over, and perhaps we may see our way.'

To this Frances made no reply save a little inclination of her head, and sat with her eyes shining, with a certain proud air of self-control and self-support, which was something quite new to her. When the uncomfortable repast could be prolonged no longer, she was the first to get up. 'If you do not mind,' she said, 'I want to speak to papa by himself.'

Constance had risen too. She looked with an air of surprise at her little sister. 'Oh, if you like,' she said; 'but I think you will find that I can be of use.'

'If you are going to the bookroom, I will come with you, papa,' said Frances, but she did not wait for any reply; she opened the door and walked before him into that place of refuge, where he had been sheltering himself all these days. Constance gave him an inquiring look, with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

'She is on her high horse, and she is more like mamma than ever; but I suppose I may come all the same.'

He wavered a moment: he would have been glad of her interposition, even though it irritated him; but he had a whimsical sense of alarm in his mind, which he could not get over. He was afraid of Frances—which was one of the most comical things in the world. He shook his head, and followed humbly into the bookroom, and himself closed the door upon the intruder. Frances had seated herself already at his table, in the seat which she always occupied when she came to consult him about the dinner, or about something out of the usual round which Mariuccia had asked for. To see her seated there, and to feel that the door was closed against all intrusion, made Waring feel as if all this disturbance was a dream. How good the quiet had been; the calm days, which nothing interfered with; the little housekeeper, whose childlike prudence and wisdom were so quaint, whose simple obedience was so ready, who never, save in respect to the *spese*, set up her own will or way! His heart grew very soft as he sat down and looked at her. No, he said to himself, he would not break that old bond; he would not compel his little girl to leave him, send her out as a sacrifice. He would rather stand against all the wives in the world.

'Papa,' said Frances, 'a great deal of harm has been done by keeping me ignorant. I want you to show me mamma's letter. Unless I see it, how can I know?'

This pulled him up abruptly and checked the softening mood. 'Your mother's letter,' he said, 'goes over a great deal of old ground. I don't see that it could do you any good. It appears I promised—what Constance told you, with her usual coolness—that one of you should be always left with her. Perhaps that was foolish.'

'Surely, papa, it was just.'

'Well, I thought so at the time. I wanted to do what was right. But there was no right in the matter. I had a perfect right to take you both away, to bring you up as I pleased. It would have been better, perhaps, had I done what the law authorised me to do. However, that need not be gone into now. What your sister said was quite true. You are at an age when you are supposed to be able to judge for yourself, and nobody in the world can force you to go where you don't want to go.'

'But if you promised, and if—my mother trusted to your promise?' There was something more solemn in that title than to say 'mamma.' It seemed easier to apply it to the unknown.

'I won't have you made a sacrifice of on my account,' he said hastily.

He was surprised by her composure, by that unwonted light in her eyes. She answered him with great gravity, slowly, as if conscious of the importance of her conclusion. 'It would be no sacrifice,' she said.

Waring, there could be no doubt, was very much startled. He could not believe his ears. 'No sacrifice? Do you mean to say that you want to leave me?' he cried.

'No, papa: that is, I did not. I knew nothing. But now that I know, if my mother wants me, I will go to her. It is my duty. And I should like it,' she added, after a pause.

Waring was dumb with surprise and dismay. He stared at her, scarcely able to believe that she could understand what she was saying—he, who had been afraid to suggest anything of the kind, who had thought of Andromeda and the virgins who were sacrificed to the dragon. He gazed aghast at this new aspect of the face with which he was so familiar, the uplifted head and shining eyes. He could not believe that this was Frances, his always docile, submissive, unemancipated girl.

'Papa,' she said, 'everything seems changed, and I too.

I want to know my mother; I want to see—how other people live.'

'Other people!' He was glad of an outlet for his irritation. 'What have we to do with other people? If it had not been for this unlucky arrival, you would never have known.'

'I must have known some time,' she said. 'And do you think it right that a girl should not know her mother—when she has a mother? I want to go to her, papa.'

He flung out of his chair with an angry movement, and took up the keys which lay on his table and opened a small cabinet which stood in the corner of the room, Frances watching him all the time with the greatest attention. Out of this he brought a small packet of letters, and threw them to her with a movement which, for so gentle a man, was almost violent. 'I kept these back for your good, not to disturb your mind. You may as well have them, since they belong to you—now,' he said.

## CHAPTER XIII

'COME out for a walk, papa,' said Constance.

'What! in the heat of the day? You think you are in England.'

'No, indeed. I wish I did—at least, that is not what I mean. But I wish you did not think it necessary to stay in a place like this. Why should you shut yourself out from the world? You are very clever, papa.'

'Who told you so? You cannot have found that out by your own unassisted judgment.'

'A great many people have told me. I have always known. You seem to have made a mystery about us, but we never made any mystery about you: for one thing, of course we couldn't, for everybody knew. But if you chose to go back to England——'

'I shall never go back to England.'

'Oh,' said Constance, with a laugh, 'never is a long day.'

'So long a day, that it is a pity you should link your fortunes to mine, my dear. Frances has been brought up to it; but your case is quite different: and you see even she catches at the first opportunity of getting away.'

'You are scarcely just to Frances,' said Constance, with her usual calm. 'You might have said the same thing of me. I took the first opportunity also. To know that one has a father, whom one never remembers to have seen, is very exciting to the imagination; and just in so much as one has been disappointed in the parent one knows, one expects to find perfection in the parent one has never seen. Anything that you don't know is better than everything you do know,' she added, with the air of a philosopher.

'I am afraid, in that case, acquaintance has been fatal to your ideal.'

'Not exactly,' she said. 'Of course you are quite different from what I supposed. But I think we might get on well enough, if you please. Do come out. If we keep in the shade, it is not really very hot. It is often hotter in London, where nobody thinks of staying indoors. If we are to live together, don't you think you must begin by giving in to me a little, papa?'

'Not to the extent of getting a sunstroke.'

'In March!' she cried, with a tone of mild derision. 'Let me come into the bookroom, then. You think if Frances goes that you will never be able to get on with me.'

'My thoughts have not gone so far as that. I may have believed that a young lady fresh from all the gaieties of London——'

'But so tired of them, and very glad of a little novelty, however it presents itself.'

'Yes, so long as it continues novel. But the novelty of making the *spese* in a village, and looking sharply after every centesimo that is asked for an artichoke——'

'The *spese* means the daily expenses? I should not mind that. And Mariuccia is far more entertaining than an ordinary English cook. And the neighbours—well, the neighbours afford some opportunities for fun. Mrs. Gaunt—is it?—expects her youngest boy. And then there is Tasie.'

The name of Tasie brought a certain relaxation to the muscles of Waring's face. He gave a glance round him, to see that all the doors were closed. 'I must confide in you, Constance; though, mind, Frances must not share it. I sitting here, simple as you see me, have been supposed dangerous to Tasie's peace of mind. Is not that an excellent joke?'

'I don't see that it is a joke at all,' said Constance, without even a smile. 'Why, Tasie is antediluvian. She must be nearly as old as you are. Any old gentleman might be dangerous to Tasie. Tell me something more wonderful than that.'

'Oh, that is how it appears to you!' said Waring. His laugh came to a sudden end, broken off, so to speak, in half, and an air of portentous gravity came over his face. He turned over the papers on the table before him, as with a sudden thought. 'By the way, I forgot I had something to do this afternoon,' he said. 'Before dinner, perhaps, we may take a stroll, if the sun is not so hot. But this is my working-time,' he added, with a stiff smile.

Constance could not disregard so plain a hint. She rose up quickly. She had taken Frances' chair, which he had forgiven her at first; but it made another note against her now.

'What have I done?' she said to herself, raising her eyebrows, angry and yet half amused by her dismissal. Frances had gone to her room too, and was not to be disturbed, as her sister had seen by the look of her face. She felt herself, as she would have said, very much 'out of it,' as she wandered round the deserted *salone*, looking at everything in it with a care suggested by her solitude rather than any real interest. She looked at the big high-coloured water-pots, turned into decorations, one could imagine against their will, which stood in the corners of the room, and which were Mrs. Durant's present to Frances; and at the blue Savona vases, with the names of medicines, real or imaginary, betraying their original intention; and all the other decorative scraps—the little old pictures, the pieces of needlework and brocade. They were pretty when she looked at them, though she had not perceived their beauty at the first glance. There were more decorations of the same description in the ante-room, which gave her a little additional occupation; and then she strolled into the loggia and threw herself into the long chair. She had a book, one of the novels she had bought on the journey. But Constance was not accustomed to much reading. She got through a chapter or two; and then she looked round upon the view and mused a little, and then returned to her novel. The second time she threw it down and went back to the drawing-room, and had another look at the Savona pots. She had thought how well they would look on a certain shelf at 'home.' And then she stopped and took herself to task. What did she mean by home? This was home. She was going to live here; it was to be her place in the world. What she had to do was to think of the decorations here, and whether she could add to them, not of vacant corners in another place. Finally, she returned again to the loggia, and sat down once more rather drearily.

There had never occurred a day in her experience in which she had been so long without 'something to do.' Something to do meant something that was amusing, something to pass the time, somebody to entertain, or perhaps, if nothing else was possible, to quarrel with. To sit alone and look round her at 'the view,' to have not a creature to say a word to, and nothing to engage herself with but a book—and nothing to look forward to but this same thing repeated three hundred and sixty-five days in the year! The prospect, the thought, made Constance shiver. It could not be. She must do something to break the spell. But what was there to do? The *spese* were all made for to-day, the dinner was ordered; and she knew very little either about the *spese* or the dinner. She would have to learn, to think of new dishes, and write them down in a little book, as Frances did. Her dinners, she said to herself, must be better than those of Frances. But when was she to begin, and how was she to do it? In the meantime she went and fetched a shawl, and while the sun blazed straight on the loggia from the south, to which it was open in front, and left only one scrap of shade in a corner scarcely enough to shelter the long chair, fell asleep there, finding that she had nothing else to do.

Frances had gone to her room with her packet of letters. She had not thought what they were, nor what had been the meaning of what her father said when he gave them to her. She took them—no, not to her own room, but to the blue room, in which there was so little comfort. Her little easy-chair, her writing-table,—all the things with which she was at home,—belonged to Constance now. She sat down, or rather up, in a stiff upright chair, and opened her little packet upon her bed. To her astonishment, she found that it contained letters addressed to herself, unopened. The first of them was printed in large letters, as for the eyes of a child. They were very simple, not very long, concluding invariably with one phrase: 'Dear, write to me'—'Write to me, my darling.' Frances read them with her eyes full of tears, with a rising wave of passion and resentment which seemed to suffocate her. He had kept them all back. What harm could they have done? Why should she have been kept in ignorance, and made to appear like a heartless child, like a creature without sense or feeling? Half for her mother, half for herself, the girl's heart swelled with a kind of fury. She had not been ready to judge her father even after she had been aware of his sin against her. She had still accepted what he did as part of him, bidding her own mind be silent, hushing all criticism. But when she read these little letters, her passion overflowed. How dared he to ignore all her rights, to allow herself to be misrepresented, to give a false idea of her? This was the most poignant pang of all. Without being selfish, it is still impossible to feel a wrong of this kind to another so acutely as to yourself. He had deprived her of the comfort of knowing that she had a mother, of communicating with her, of retaining some hold upon that closest of natural friends. That injury she had condoned and forgiven; but when Frances saw how her father's action must have shaped the idea of herself in the mind of her mother, there was a moment in which she felt that she could not forgive him. If she had received year by year these tender letters, yet never had been moved to answer one of them, what a creature must she have been; devoid of heart or common feeling, or even good taste, that superficial grace by which the want of better things is concealed! She was more horrified by this thought than by any other discovery she could have made. She seemed to see the Frances whom her mother knew—a little ill-conditioned child; a small, petty, ungracious, unloving girl. Was this what had been thought of her? And it was all his fault—all her father's fault!

At first she could see no excuse for him. She would not allow to herself that any love for her, or desire to retain her affection, was at the bottom of the concealment. She got a sheet of paper, and began to write with passionate vehemence, pouring forth all her heart. 'Imagine that I have never seen your dear letters till to-day—never till to-day! and what must you think of me?' she wrote. But when she had put her whole heart into it, working a miracle, and making the dull paper to glow and weep, there came a change over her thoughts. She had kept his secret till now. She had not betrayed even to Constance the ignorance in which she had been kept; and should she change her course, and betray him now?

As she came to think it over, she felt that she herself blamed her father bitterly, that he had fallen from the pedestal on which to her he had stood all her life. Yet the thought that others should be conscious of this degradation was terrible to her. When Constance spoke lightly of him, it was intolerable to Frances; and the mother of whom she knew nothing, of whom she knew only that she was her mother,—a woman who had grievances of her own against him, who would be perhaps pleased, almost pleased, to have proof that he had done this wrong! Frances paused, with the fervour of indignation still in her heart, to consider how she should bear it if this were so. It was all selfish, she said to herself, growing more miserable as she fought with the conviction that whether in condemning him or covering what he had done, herself was her first thought. She had to choose now between vindicating herself at his cost, or suffering continued misconception to screen him. Which should she do? Slowly she folded up the letter she had written and put it away, not destroying but saving it, as leaving it still possible to carry out her first intention. Then she wrote another shorter, half-fictitious letter, in which the bitterness in her heart seemed to take the form of reproach, and her consent to obey her mother's call was forced and sullen. But this letter was no sooner written than it was torn to pieces. What was she to do? She ended, after much thought, by destroying also her first letter, and writing as follows:—

'DEAR MOTHER,—To see my sister and to hear that you want me, is very bewildering and astonishing to me. I am very ready to come, if, indeed, you will forgive me all that you must think so bad in me, and let me try as well as I can to please you. Indeed I desire to do so with all my heart. I have understood very little, and I have been thoughtless, and, you will think, without any natural affection; but this is because I was so ignorant, and had nobody to tell me. Forgive me, dear mamma. I do not feel as if I dare write to you now and call you by that name. As soon as we can consider and see how it is best for me to travel, I will come. I am not clever and beautiful, like Constance; but indeed I do wish to please you with all my heart. FRANCES.'

This was all she could say. She put it up in an envelope, feeling confused with her long thinking, and with all the elements of change that were about her, and took it back to the bookroom to ask for the address. She had felt that she could not approach her father with composure or speak to him of ordinary matters; but it made a little formal bridge, as it were, from one kind of intercourse to another, to ask him for that address.

'Will you please tell me where mamma lives?' she said.

Waring turned round quickly to look at her. 'So you have written already?'

'O papa, can you say "already"? What kind of creature must she think I am, never to have sent a word all these years?'

He paused a moment and then said, 'You have told her, I suppose?'

'I have told her nothing except that I am ready to come whenever we can arrange how I am to travel. Papa,' she said, with one of those sudden relentings which come in the way of our sternest displeasure with those we love—'O papa,' laying her hand on his arm, 'why did you do it? I am obliged to let her think that I have been without a heart all my life—for I cannot bear it when any one blames you.'

'Frances,' he said, with a response equally sudden, putting his arm round her, 'what will my life be without you? I have always trusted in you, depended on you without knowing it. Let Constance go back to her, and stay you with me.'

Frances had not been accustomed to many demonstrations of affection, and this moved her almost beyond her power of self-control. She put down her head upon her father's shoulder and cried, 'Oh, if we could only go back a week! but we can't; no, nor even half a day. Things that might have been this morning, can't be now, papa! I was very, very angry—oh, in a rage—when I read these letters. Why did you keep them from me? Why did you keep my mother from me? I wrote and told her everything, and then I tore up my letter and told her nothing. But I can never be the same again,' said the girl, shaking her head with that conviction of the unchangeableness of a first trouble which is so strong in youth. 'Now I know what it is to be one thing and appear another, and to bear blame and suffer for what you have not deserved.'

Waring repented his appeal to his child. He repented even the sudden impulse which had induced him to make it. He withdrew his arm from her with a sudden revulsion of feeling, and a recollection that Constance was not emotional, but a young woman of the world, who would understand many things which Frances did not understand. He withdrew his arm, and said somewhat coldly, 'Show me what address you have put upon your mother's letter. You must not make any mistake in that.'

Frances dried her eyes hastily, and felt the check. She put her letter before him without a word. It was addressed to Mrs. Waring, no more.

'I thought so,' he said, with a laugh which sounded harsh to the excited girl; 'and, to be sure, you had no means of knowing. I told you your mother was a much more important person than I. You will see the difference between wealth and poverty, as well as between a father's sway and a mother's, when you go to Eaton Square. This is your mother's address.' He wrote it hastily on a piece of paper and pushed it towards her. Frances had received many shocks and surprises in the course of these days, but scarcely one which was more startling to her simple mind than this. The paper which her father gave her did not bear his name. It was addressed to Lady Markham, Eaton Square, London. Frances turned to him an astonished gaze. 'That is where—mamma is living?' she said.

'That is—your mother's name and address,' he answered, coldly. 'I told you she was a greater personage than I.'

'But, papa——'

'You are not aware,' he said, 'that, according to the beautiful arrangements of society, a woman who makes a second marriage below her is allowed to keep her first husband's name. It is so, however. Lady Markham chose to avail herself of that privilege. That is all, I suppose? You can send your letter without any further reference to me.'

Frances went away without a word, treading softly, with a sort of suspense of life and thought. She could not tell how she felt or what it meant. She knew nothing about the arrangements of society. Did it mean something wrong, something that was impossible? Frances could not tell how that could be—that your father and mother should not only live apart, but have different names. A vague horror took possession of her mind. She went back to her room again, and stared at that strange piece of paper without knowing what to make of it. Lady Markham! It was not to that personage she had written her poor little simple letter. How could she say mother to a great lady, one who was not even of the same name? She was far too ignorant to know how little importance was to be attached to this. To Frances, a name was so much. She had never been taught anything but the primitive symbols, the innocently conventional alphabet of life. This new discovery filled her with a chill horror. She took her letter out of its envelope with the intention of destroying that too, and letting silence—that silence which had reigned over her life so long—fall again and for ever between her and the mother whose very name was not hers. But as this impulse swept over her, her eye caught one of the first of the little letters which had revealed this unknown woman to her. It was written in very large letters, such as a child might read, and in little words. 'My darling, write to me; I long so for you. —Your loving Mother.' Her simple mind was swept by contending impulses, like strong winds carrying her now one way, now another. And unless it should be that unknown mother herself, there was nobody in the world to whom she could turn for counsel. Her heart revolted against Constance, and her father had been vexed, she could not tell how. She was incapable of betraying the secrets of the family to any one beyond its range. What was she to do?

And all this because the mother, the source of so much disturbance in her little life, was Lady Markham and not Mrs. Waring! But this, to the ignorance and simplicity of Frances, was the most incomprehensible mystery of all.

## CHAPTER XIV

WARING went out with Constance when the sun got low in the skies. He took a much longer walk than was at all usual to him, and pointed out to her many points of view. The paths that ran among the olive woods, the little terraces which cut up the sides of the hills, the cool gray foliage and gnarled trunks, the clumps of flowers—garden flowers in England, but here as wild, and rather more common than blades of grass—delighted her; and her talk delighted him. He had not gone so far for months; nor had he, he thought, for years found the time go so fast. It was very different from Frances' mild attempts at conversation. 'Do you think, papa?' 'Do you remember, papa?'—so many references to events so trifling, and her little talk about Tasie's plans and Mrs. Gaunt's news. Constance took him boldly into her life and told him what was going on in *the world*. Ah, the world! That was the only world. He had said in his bitterness, again and again, that Society was as limited as any village, and duchesses curiously like washerwomen; but when he found himself once more on the edge of that great tumult of existence, he was like the old war-horse that neighs at the sound of the battle. He began to ask her questions about the people he had known. He had always been a shy, proud man, and had never thrown himself into the stream; but still there had been people who had known him and liked him, or whom he had liked; and gradually he awakened into animation and pleasure.

When they met the old General taking his stroll too, before dinner, that leathern old Indian was dazzled by the bright creature, who walked along between them, almost as tall as the two men, with her graceful careless step and independent ways, not deferring to them as the other ladies did, but leading the conversation. Even General Gaunt began to think whether there was any one whom he could speak of, any one he had known, whom perhaps this young exponent of Society might know. She knew everybody. Even princes and princesses had no mystery for her. She told them what everybody said, with an air of knowing better, which in her meant no conceit or presumption, as in other young persons. Constance was quite unconscious of the possibility of being thus judged. She was not self-conscious at all. She was pleased to bring out her news for the advantage of the seniors. Frances was none the wiser when her sister told her the change that had come over the Grandmaisons, or how Lord Sunbury's marriage had been brought about, and why people now had altered their hours for the Row. Frances listened; but she had never heard about Lord Sunbury's marriage, nor why it should shock the elegant public. But the gentlemen remembered his father, or they knew how young men commit themselves without intending it. It is not to be supposed that there was anything at all *risqué* in Constance's talk. She touched, indeed, upon the edge of scandals which had been in the newspapers, and therefore were known even to people in the Riviera; but she did it with the most absolute innocence, either not knowing or not understanding the evil. 'I believe there was something wrong, but I don't know what—mamma would never tell me,' she said. Her conversation was like a very light graceful edition of a Society paper—not then begun to be—with all the nastiness and almost all the malice left out. But not quite all; there was enough to be piquant. 'I am afraid I am a little ill-natured; but I don't like that man,' she would say now and then. When she said, 'I don't like that woman,' the gentlemen laughed. She was conscious of having a little success, and she was pleased too. Frances perhaps might be a better housekeeper, but Constance could not but think that in the equally important work of amusing papa she would be more successful than Frances. It was not much of a triumph, perhaps, for a girl who had known so many; but yet it was the only one as yet possible in the position in which she now was.

'I suppose it is settled that Frances is to go?' she said, as General Gaunt took the way to his bungalow, and she and her father turned towards home.

'She seems to have settled it for herself,' he said.

'I am always repeating she is so like mamma—that is exactly what mamma would have done. They are very positive. You and I, papa, are not positive at all.'

'I think, my dear, that coming off as you did by yourself was very positive indeed—and the first step in the universal turning upside down which has ensued.'

'I hope you are not sorry I came?'

'No, Constance; I am very glad to have you;' and this was quite true, although he had said to Frances something that sounded very different. Both things were true—both that he wished she had never left her mother; that he wished she might return to her mother, and leave Frances with him as of old; and that he was very glad to have her here.

'If I were to go back, would not everything settle down just as it was before?'

Then he thought of what Frances, taught by the keenness of a personal experience, had said to him a few hours ago. 'No,' he said; 'nothing can ever be as it was before. We never can go back to what has been, whether the event that has changed it has been happy or sad.'

'Oh, surely sometimes,' said Constance. 'That is a dreadful way to talk of anything so trifling as my visit. It could not make any real difference, because all the facts are just the same as they were before.'

To this he made no reply. She had no way, thanks to Frances, of finding out how different the position was. And she went on, after a pause—'Have you settled how she is to go?'

'I have not even thought of that.'

'But, papa, you must think of it. She cannot go unless you manage it for her. Markham heard of those people coming, and that made it quite easy for me. If Markham were here——'

'Heaven forbid!'

'I have always heard you were prejudiced about Markham. I don't think he is very safe myself. I have warned Frances, whatever she does, not to let herself get into his hands.'

'Frances in Markham's hands! That is a thing I could not permit for a moment. Your mother may have a right to Frances' society, but none to throw her into the companionship of——'

'Her brother, papa.'

'Her brother! Her step-brother, if you please—which I think scarcely a relationship at all.'

Waring's prejudices, when they were roused, were strong. His daughter looked up in amazement at his sudden passion, the frown on his face, and the fire in his eye.

'You forget that I have been brought up with Markham,' she said. 'He is *my* brother; and he is a very good brother. There is nothing he will not do for me. I only warned Frances because—because she is different; because——'

'Because—she is a girl who ought not to breathe the same air with a young reprobate—a young——'

'Papa! you are mistaken. I don't know what Markham may have been; but he is not a reprobate. It was because Frances does not understand chaff, you know. She would think he was in earnest, and he is never in earnest. She would take him seriously, and nobody takes him seriously. But if you think he is bad, there is nobody who thinks that. He is not bad; he only has ways of thinking——'

'Which I hope my daughters will never share,' said Waring, with a little formality.

Constance raised her head as if to speak, but then stopped, giving him a look which said more than words, and added no more.

In the meantime Frances had been left alone. She had directed her letter, and left it to be posted. That step was taken, and could no more be thought over. She was glad to have a little of her time to herself, which once had been all to herself. She did not like as yet to broach the subject of her departure to Mariuccia; but she thought it all over very anxiously, trying to find some way which would take the burden of the household off the shoulders of Constance, who was not used to it. She thought the best thing to do would be to write out a series of *menus*, which Mariuccia might suggest to Constance, or carry out upon her own responsibility, whichever was most practicable; and she resolved that various little offices, which she had herself fulfilled, might be transferred to Domenico without interfering with her father's comfort. All these arrangements, though she turned them over very soberly in her mind, had a bewildering, dizzying effect upon her. She thought that it was as if she were going to die. When she went away out of the narrow enclosure of this world, which she knew, it would be to something so entirely strange to her that it would feel like another life. It would be as if she had died. She would not know anything; the surroundings, the companions, the habits, all would be strange. She would have to leave utterly behind her everything she had ever known. The thought was not melancholy, as is in almost all cases the thought of leaving 'the warm precincts of the cheerful day'; it made her heart swell and rise with an anticipation which was full of excitement and pleasure, but which at the same time had the effect of making her brain swim.

She could not make to herself any picture of the world to which she was going. It would be softer, finer, more luxurious than anything she knew; but that was all. Of her mother, she did try to form some idea. She was acquainted only with mothers who were old. Mrs. Durant, who wore a cap, encircling her face, and tied under her chin; and Mrs. Gaunt, who had grandchildren who were as old as Frances. Her own mother could not be like either of these; but still she would be old, more or less—would wrap herself up when she went out, would have gray, or even perhaps white hair (which Frances liked in an old lady: Mrs. Durant wore a front, and Mrs. Gaunt was suspected of dyeing her hair), and would not care to move about more than she could help. She would go out 'into Society' beautifully dressed with lace and jewels; and Frances grew more dizzy than ever, trying to imagine herself standing behind this magnificent old figure, like a maid of honour behind a queen. But it was difficult to imagine the details of a picture so completely vague. There was a general sense of splendour and novelty, a vague expectation of something delightful, which it was beyond her power to realise, but no more.

She had roused herself from the vague excitement of these dreams which were very absorbing, though there was so little solidity in them, with a sudden fear that she was losing all the afternoon, and that it was time to prepare for dinner. She went to the corner of the loggia which commanded the road, to look out for Constance and her father. The road swept along below the Punto, leading to the town; and a smaller path traversing the little height, climbed upward to the platform on which the Palazzo stood. Frances did not at first remark, as in general every villager does, an unfamiliar figure making its way up this path. Her father and sister were not visible, and it was for them she was looking. Presently, however, her eye was caught by the stranger, no doubt an English tourist, with a glass in his eye—a little man, with a soft gray felt hat, which, when he lifted his head to inspect the irregular structure of the old town, gave him something the air of a moving mushroom. His movements were somewhat irregular, as his eyes were fixed upon the walls, and did not serve to guide his feet, which stumbled continually on the inequalities of the path. His progress began to amuse her, as he came nearer, his head raised, his eyes fixed upon the buildings before him, his person executing a series of undulations like a ship in a storm. He climbed up at last to the height, and coming up to some women who were seated on the stone bench opposite to Frances on the loggia, began to ask them for instructions as to how he was to go.

The little scene amused Frances. The women were knitting, with a little cluster of children about them, scrambling upon the bench or on the dusty pathway at their feet. The stranger took off his big hat and addressed them with few words and many gestures. She heard *casa* and *Inglese*, but nothing else that was comprehensible. The women did their best to understand, and replied volubly. But here the little tourist evidently could not follow. He was like so many tourist visitors, capable of asking his question, but incapable of understanding the answer given him. Then there arose a shrill little tempest of laughter, in which he joined, and of which Frances herself could not resist the contagion. Perhaps a faint echo from the loggia caught the ear of one of the women, who knew her well, and who immediately pointed her out to the stranger. The little man turned round and made a few steps towards the Palazzo. He took off the mushroom-top of gray felt, and presented to her an ugly, little, vivacious countenance. 'I beg you ten thousand pardons,' he said; 'but if you speak English, as I understand them to say, will you be so very kind as to direct me to the house of Mr. Waring? Ah, I am sure you are both English and kind! They tell me he lives near here.'

Frances looked down from her height demurely, suppressing the too ready laugh, to listen to this queer little man; but his question took her very much by surprise. Another stranger asking for Mr. Waring! But oh, so very different a one from Constance—an odd, little, ugly man, looking up at her in a curious one-sided attitude, with his glass in his eye. 'He lives here,' she said.

'What? Where?' He had replaced his mushroom on his head, and he cocked up towards her one ear, the ear upon the opposite side to the eye which wore the glass.

'Here!' cried Frances pointing to the house, with a laugh which she could not restrain.

The stranger raised his eyebrows so much and so suddenly that his glass fell. 'Oh!' he cried—but the biggest O, round as the O of Giotto, as the Italians say. He paused there some time, looking at her, his mouth retaining the shape of that exclamation; and then he cast an investigating glance along the wall, and asked, 'How am I to get in?'

'Nunziata, show the gentleman the door,' cried Frances to one of the women on the bench. She lingered a moment, to look again down the road for her father. It was true that nothing could be so wonderful as what had already happened; but it seemed that surprises were not yet over. Would this be some one else who had known him, who was arriving full of the tale that had been told, and was a mystery no longer—some 'old friend,' like Mr. Mannering, who would not be satisfied without betraying the harmless hermit, whom some chance had led him to discover? There was some bitterness in Frances' thoughts. She had not remembered the Mannerings before, in the rush of other things to think of. The fat ruddy couple, so commonplace and so comfortable! Was it all their doing? Were they to blame for everything? for the conclusion of one existence, and the beginning of another? She went into the drawing-room and sat down there, to be ready to receive the visitor. He could not be so important—that was impossible; there could be no new mystery to record.

When the door opened and Domenico solemnly ushered in the stranger, Frances, although her thoughts were not gay, could scarcely help laughing again. He carried his big gray mushroom-top now in his hand; and the little round head which had been covered with it seemed incomplete without that thatch. Frances felt herself looking from the head to the hat with a ludicrous sense of this incompleteness. He had a small head, thinly covered with light hair, which seemed to grow in tufts like grass. His eyes twinkled keen, two very bright gray eyes, from the puckers of eyelids which looked old, as if he had got them second-hand. There was a worn and wrinkled look about him altogether, carried out in his dress, and even in his boots, which suggested the same idea. An old man who looked young or a young man who looked old. She could not make out which he was. He did not bow and hesitate, and announce himself as a friend of her father's, as she expected him to do, but came up to her briskly with a quick step, but a shuffle in his gait.

'I suppose I must introduce myself,' he said; 'though it is odd that we should need an introduction to each other, you and I. After the first moment, I should have known you anywhere. You are quite like my mother. Frances, isn't it? And I'm Markham, of course, you know.'

'Markham!' cried Frances. She had thought she could never be surprised again, after all that had happened. But she felt herself more astonished than ever now.

'Yes, Markham. You think I am not much to look at, I can see. I am not generally admired at the first glance. Shake hands, Frances. You don't quite feel like giving me a kiss, I suppose, at the first offset? Never mind. We shall be very good friends, after a while.'

He sat down, drawing a chair close to her. 'I am very glad to find you by yourself. I like the looks of you. Where is Con? Taken possession of the governor, and left you alone to keep house, I should suppose?'

'Constance has gone out to walk with papa. I had several things to do.'

'I have not the least doubt of it. That would be the usual distribution of labour, if you remained together. Fan, my mother has sent me to fetch you home.'

Frances drew a little farther away. She gave him a look of vague alarm. The familiarity of the address troubled her. But when she looked at him again, her gravity gave way. He was such a queer, such a very queer little man.

'You may laugh if you like, my dear,' he said. 'I am used to it. Providence—always the best judge, no doubt—has not given me an awe-inspiring countenance. It is hard upon my mother, who is a pretty woman. But I accept the position, for my part. This is a charming place. You have got a number of nice things. And those little sketches are very tolerable. Who did them? You? Waring, so far as I remember, used to draw very well himself. I am glad you draw; it will give you a little occupation. I like the looks of you, though I don't think you admire me.'

'Indeed,' said Frances, troubled, 'it is because I am so much surprised. Are you really—are you sure you are——'

He gave a little chuckle, which made her start—an odd, comical, single note of laughter, very cordial and very droll, like the little man himself.

'I've got a servant with me,' he said, 'down at the hotel, who knows that I go by the name of Markham when I'm at home. I don't know if that will satisfy you. But Con, to be sure, knows me, which will be better. You don't hear any voice of nature saying within your breast, "This is my long-lost brother?" That's a pity. But by and by, you'll see, we'll be very good friends.'

'Oh, I didn't mean that I had any doubt. It is so great a surprise—one thing after another.'

'Now, answer me one question: Did you know anything about your family before Con came? Ah,' he said, catching her alarmed and wondering glance, 'I thought not. I have always said so:—he never told you. And it has all burst upon you in a moment, you poor little thing. But you needn't be afraid of us. My mother has her faults; but she is a nice woman. You will like her. And I am very queer to look at, and many people think I have a screw loose. But I'm not bad to live with. Have you settled it with the governor? Has he made many objections? He and I never drew well together. Perhaps you know?'

'He does not speak as if—he liked you. But I don't know anything. I have not been told—much. Please don't ask me things,' Frances cried.

'No, I will not. On the contrary, I'll tell you everything. Con probably would put a spoke in my wheel too. My dear little Fan, don't mind any of them. Give me your little hand. I am neither bad nor good. I am very much what people make me. I am nasty with the nasty sometimes—more shame to me: and disagreeable with the disagreeable. But I am innocent with the innocent,' he said with some earnestness; 'and that is what you are, unless my eyes deceive me. You need not be afraid of me.'

'I am not afraid,' said Frances, looking at him. Then she added, after a pause, 'Not of you, nor of any one. I have never met any bad people. I don't believe any one would do me harm.'

'Nor I,' he said with a little fervour, patting her hand with his own. 'All the same,' he added, after a moment, 'it is perhaps wise not to give them the chance. So I've come to fetch you home.'

Frances, as she became accustomed to this remarkable new member of her family, began immediately, after her fashion, to think of the material necessities of the case. She could not start with him at once on the journey; and in the meantime where should she put him? The most natural thing seemed to be to withdraw again from the blue room, and take the little one behind, which looked out on the court. That would do, and no one need be any the wiser. She said, with a little hesitation, 'I must go now and see about your room.'

'Room!' he cried. 'Oh no; there's no occasion for a room. I wouldn't trouble you for the world. I have got rooms at the hotel. I'll not stay even, since daddy's out, to meet him. You can tell him I'm here, and what I came for. If he wants to see me, he can look me up. I am very glad I have seen *you*. I'll write to the mother to-night to say you're quite satisfactory, and a credit to all your belongings; and I'll come to-morrow to see Con; and in the meantime, Fan, you must settle when you are to come; for it is an awkward time for a man to be loafing about here.'

He got up as he spoke, and, stooping, gave her a serious brotherly kiss upon her forehead. 'I hope you and I will be very great friends,' he said.

And then he was gone! Was he a dream only, an imagination? But he was not the sort of figure that imagination produces. No dreamman could ever be so comical to behold, could ever wear a coat so curiously wrinkled, or those boots, in the curves of which the dust lay as in the inequalities of the dry and much-frequented road.

## CHAPTER XV

THE walk with Constance, though he had set out upon it reluctantly, had done Waring great good. He was comparatively rehabilitated in his own eyes. Between her and him there was no embarrassment, no uneasy consciousness. She had paid him the highest compliment by taking refuge with him, flying to his protection from the tyranny of her mother, and giving him thus a victory as sweet as unexpected over that nearest yet furthest of all connections, that inalienable antagonist in life. He had been painfully put out of *son assiette*, as the French say. Instead of the easy superiority which he had held not only in his own house, but in the limited society about, he had been made to stand at the bar, first by his own child, afterwards by the old clergyman, for whom he entertained a kindly contempt. Both of these simple wits had called upon him to account for his conduct. It was the most extraordinary turning of the tables that ever had occurred to a man like himself. And though he had spoken the truth when in that moment of melting he had taken his little girl into his arms and bidden her stay with him, he was yet glad now to get away from Frances, to feel himself occupying his proper place with her sister, and to return thus to a more natural state of affairs. The intercourse between him and his child-companion had been closer than ever could, he believed, exist between him and any other human being whatsoever; but it had been rent in twain by all the concealments which he was conscious of, by all the discoveries which circumstances had forced upon her. He could no longer be at his ease with her, or she regard him as of old. The attachment was too deep, the interruption too hard, to be reconcilable with that calm which is necessary to ordinary existence. Constance had restored him to herself by her pleasant indifference, her easy talk, her unconsciousness of everything that was not usual and natural. He began to think that if Frances were but away—since she wished to go—a new life might begin—a life in which there would be nothing below the surface, no mystery, which is a mistake in ordinary life. It would be difficult, no doubt, for a brilliant creature like Constance to content herself with the humdrum life which suited Frances; and whether she would condescend to look after his comforts, he did not know. But so long as Mariuccia was there, he could not suffer much materially; and she was a very amusing companion, far more so than her sister. As he came back to the Palazzo, he was reconciled to himself.

This comfortable state of mind, however, did not last long. Frances met them at the door with her face full of excitement. 'Did you meet him?' she said. 'You must have met him. He has not been gone ten minutes.'

'Meet whom? We met no one but the General.'

'I think I know,' cried Constance. 'I have been expecting him every day—Markham.'

'He says he has come to fetch me, papa.'

'Markham!' cried Waring. His face clouded over in a moment. It is not easy to get rid of the past. He had accomplished it for a dozen years; and after a very bad moment, he thought he was about to shuffle it off again; but it was evident that in this he was premature. 'I will not allow you to go with Markham,' he said. 'Don't say anything more. Your mother ought to have known better. He is not an escort I choose for my daughter.'

'Poor old Markham! he is a very nice escort,' said Constance, in her easy way. 'There is no harm in him, papa. But never mind till after dinner, and then we can talk it over. You are ready, Fan? Oh, then I must fly. We have had a delightful walk. I never knew anything about fathers before;

they are the most charming companions,' she said, kissing her hand to him as she went away. But this did not mollify the angry man. There rose up before him the recollection of a hundred contests in which Markham's voice had come in to make everything worse, or of which Markham's escapades had been the cause.

'I will not see him,' he said; 'I will not sanction his presence here. You must give up the idea of going altogether, till he is out of the way.'

'I think, papa, you must see him.'

'Must—there is no *must*. I have not been in the habit of acknowledging compulsion, and be assured that I shall not begin now. You seem to expect that your small affairs are to upset my whole life!'

'I suppose,' said Frances, 'my affairs are small; but then they are my life too.'

She ought to have been subdued into silence by his first objection; but, on the contrary, she met his angry eyes with a look which was deprecating, but not abject, holding her little own. It was a long time since Waring had encountered anything which he could not subdue and put aside out of his path. But, he said to himself—all that long restrained and silent temper which had once reigned and raged within him, springing up again unsubdued—he might have known! The moment long deferred, yet inevitable, which brought him in contact once more with his wife, could bring nothing with it but pain. Strife breathed from her wherever she appeared. He had never been a match for her and her boy, even at his best; and now that he had forgotten the ways of battle—now that his strength was broken with long quiet, and the sword had fallen from his hand—she had a pull over him now which she had not possessed before. He could have done without both the children a dozen years ago. He was conscious that it was more from self-assertion than from love that he had carried off the little one, who was rather an embarrassment than a pleasure in those days—because he would not let her have everything her own way. But now, Frances was no longer a creature without identity, not a thing to be handed from one to another. He could not free himself of interest in her, of responsibility for her, of feeling his honour and credit implicated in all that concerned her. Ah! that woman knew. She had a hold upon him that she never had before; and the first use she made of it was to insult him—to send her son, whom he hated, for his daughter, to force him into unwilling intercourse with her family once more.

Frances took the opportunity to steal away while her father gloomily pursued these thoughts. What a change from the tranquillity which nothing disturbed! now one day after another, there was some new thing that stirred up once more the original pain. There was no end to it. The mother's letters at one moment, the brother's arrival at another, and no more quiet whatever could be done, no more peace.

Nevertheless, dinner and the compulsory decorum which surrounds that great daily event, had its usual tranquillising effect. Waring could not shut out from his mind the consciousness that to refuse to see his wife's son, the brother of his own children, was against all the decencies of life. It is easy to say that you will not acknowledge social compulsion, but it is not so easy to carry out that determination. By the time that dinner was over, he had begun to perceive that it was impossible. He took no part, indeed, in the conversation, lightly maintained, by Constance, about her brother, made short replies even when he was directly addressed, and kept up more or less the lowering aspect with which he had meant to crush Frances. But Frances was not crushed, and Constance was excited and gay. 'Let us send for him after dinner,' she said. 'He is always amusing. There is nothing Markham does not know. I have seen nobody for a fortnight, and no doubt a hundred things have happened. Do send for Markham, Frances. Oh, you must not look at papa. I know papa is not fond of him. Dear! if you think one can be fond of everybody one meets—especially one's connections. Everybody knows that you hate half of them. That makes it piquant. There is nobody you can say such spiteful things to as people whom you belong to, whom you call by their Christian names.'

'That is a charming Christian sentiment—entirely suited to the surroundings you have been used to, Con; but not to your sister's.'

'Oh, my sister! She has heard plenty of hard things said of that good little Tasie, who is her chief friend. Frances would not say them herself. She doesn't know how. But her surroundings are not so ignorant. You are not called upon to assume so much virtue, papa.'

'I think you forget a little to whom you are speaking,' said Waring, with quick anger.

'Papa!' cried Constance, with an astonished look, 'I think it is you who forget. We are not in the middle ages. Mamma failed to remember that. I hope you have not forgotten too, or I shall be sorry I came here.'

He looked at her with a sudden gleam of rage in his eyes. That temper which had fallen into disuse was no more overcome than when all this trouble began; but he remained silent, putting force upon himself, though he could not quite conceal the struggle. At last he burst into an angry laugh: 'You will train me, perhaps, in time to the subjection which is required from the nineteenth-century parent,' he said.

'You are charming,' said his daughter, with a bow and smile across the table. 'There is only this lingering trace of medievalism in respect to Markham. But you know, papa, really a feud can't exist in these days. Now, answer me yourself; can it? It would subject us all to ridicule. My experience is that people as a rule are *not* fond of each other; but to show it is quite a different thing. Oh no, papa; no one can do that.'

She was so certain of what she said, so calm in the enunciation of her dogmas, that he only looked at her and made no other reply. And when Constance appealed to Frances whether Domenico should not be sent to the hotel to call Markham, he avoided the inquiring look which Frances cast at him. 'If papa has no objection,' she said with hesitation and alarm. 'Oh, papa can have no objection,' Constance cried: and the message was sent; and Markham came. Frances, frightened, made many attempts to excuse herself; but her father would neither see nor hear the efforts she made. He retired to the bookroom, while the girls entertained their visitor on the loggia—or rather, while he entertained them. Waring heard the voices mingled with laughter, as we all hear the happier intercourse of others when we are ourselves in gloomy opposition, nursing our wrath. He thought they were all the more lively, all the more gay, because he was displeased. Even Frances. He forgot that he had made up his mind that Frances had better go (as she wished to go), and felt that she was a little monster to take so cordially to the stranger whom she knew he disliked and disapproved. Nevertheless, in spite of this irritation and misery, the little lecture of Constance on what was conventionally necessary had so much effect upon him that he appeared on the loggia before Markham went away, and conquered himself sufficiently to receive, if not to make much response to the salutations which his wife's son offered. Markham jumped up from his seat with the greatest cordiality, when this tall shadow appeared in the soft darkness. 'I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, sir, after all these years. I hope I am not such a nuisance as I was when you knew me before—at the age when all males should be kept out of sight of their seniors, as the sage says.'

'What sage was that? Ah! his experience was all at second-hand.'

'Not like yours, sir,' said Markham. And then there was a slight pause, and Constance struck in.

'Markham is a great institution to people who don't get the *Morning Post*. He has told me a heap of things. In a fortnight, when one is not on the spot, it is astonishing what quantities of things happen. In town one gets used to having one's gossip hot and hot every day.'

'The advantage of abstinence is that you get up such an appetite for your next meal. I had only a few items of news. My mother gave me many messages for you, sir. She hopes you will not object to trust little Frances to my care.'

'I object—to trust my child to any one's care,' said Waring, quickly.

'I beg your pardon. You intend, then, to take my sister to England yourself,' the stranger said.

It was dark, and their faces were invisible to each other; but the girls looking on saw a momentary swaying of the tall figure towards the smaller one, which suggested something like a blow. Frances had nearly sprung from her seat; but Constance put out her hand and restrained her. She judged rightly. Passion was strong in Waring's mind. He could, had inclination prevailed, have seized the little man by the coat, and pitched him out into the road below. But bonds were upon him more potent than if they had been made of iron.

'I have no such intention,' he said. 'I should not have sent her at all. But it seems she wishes to go. I will not interfere with her arrangements. But she must have some time to prepare.'

'As long as she likes, sir,' said Markham, cheerfully. 'A few days more out of the east wind will be delightful to me.'

And no more passed between them. Waring strolled about the loggia with his cigarette. Though Frances had made haste to provide a new chair as easy as the other, he had felt himself dislodged, and had not yet settled into a new place; and when he joined them in the evening, he walked about or sat upon the wall, instead of lounging in indolent comfort, as in the old quiet days. On this evening he stood at the corner, looking down upon the lights of the Marina in the distance, and the gray twinkle of the olives in the clear air of the night. The poor neighbours of the little town were still on the Punto, enjoying the coolness of the evening hours; and the murmur of their talk rose on one side, a little softened by distance; while the group on the loggia renewed its conversation close at hand. Waring stood and listened with a contempt which he partially knew to be unjust. But he was sore and bitter, and the ease and gaiety seemed a kind of insult to him, one of many insults which he was of opinion he had received from his wife's son. 'Confounded little fool,' he said to himself.

But Constance was right in her worldly wisdom. It would make them all ridiculous if he made objections to Markham, if he showed openly his distaste to him. The world was but a small world at Bordighera; but yet it was not without its power. The interrupted conversation went on with great vigour. He remarked with a certain satisfaction that Frances talked very little; but Constance and her brother—as he called himself, the puppy!—never paused. There is no such position for seeing the worst of ordinary conversation. Waring stood looking out blankly upon the bewildering lines of the hills towards the west, with the fresh breeze in his face, and his cigarette only kept alight by a violent puff now and then, listening to the lively chatter. How vacant it was—about this one and that one; about So-and-so's peculiarities; about things not even made clear, which each understood at half a word, which made them laugh. Good heavens! at what? Not at the wit of it, for there was no wit—at some ludicrous image involved, which to the listener was dull, dull as the village chatter on the other side; but more dull, more vapid in its artificial ring. How they echoed each other, chiming in; how they remembered anecdotes to the discredit of their friends; how they ran on in the same circle endlessly, with jests that were without point even to Frances, who sat listening in an eager tension of interest, but could not keep up to the height of the talk, which was all about people she did not know—and still more without point to Waring, who had known, but knew no longer, and who was angry and mortified and bitter, feeling his supremacy taken from him in his own house, and all his habits shattered: yet knew very well that he could not resist; that to show his dislike would only make him ridiculous; that he was once more subject to Society, and dare not show his contempt for its bonds.

After a while he flung his half-finished cigarette over the wall, and stalked away, with a brief 'Excuse me, but I must say good-night.' Markham sprang up from his chair; but his step-father only waved his hand to the little party sitting in the evening darkness, and went away, his footsteps sounding upon the marble floor through the *salone* and the ante-room, closing the doors behind him. There was a little silence as he disappeared.

'Well,' said Markham, with a long-drawn breath, 'that's over, Con; and better than might have been expected.'

'Better! Do you call that better? I should say almost as bad as could be. Why didn't you stand up to him and have it out?'

'My dear, he always cows me a little,' said Markham. 'I remember times when I stood up to him, as you say, with that idiotcy of youth in which you are so strong, Con; but I think I generally came off second-best. Our respected papa has a great gift of language when he likes.'

'He does not like now, he is too old; he has given up that sort of thing. Ask Frances. She thinks him the mildest of pious fathers.'

'If you please,' said the little voice of Frances out of the gloom, with a little quiver in it, 'I wish you would not speak about papa so, before me. It is perhaps quite right of you, who have no feeling for him, or don't know him very well; but with me it is quite different. Whether you are right or wrong, I cannot have it, please.'

'The little thing is quite right, Con,' said Markham. 'I beg your pardon, little Fan. I have a great respect for papa, though he has none for me. Too old! He is not-so old as I am, and a much more estimable member of society. He is not old enough—that is the worst of it—for you and me.'

'I am not going to encourage her in her nonsense,' said Constance, 'as if one's father or mother was something sacred, as if they were not just human beings like ourselves. But apart from that, as I have told Frances, I think very well of papa.'

## CHAPTER XVI

THERE was no more said for a day or two about the journey. But that it was to take place, that Markham was waiting till his step-sister was ready, and that Frances was making her preparations to go, nobody any longer attempted to ignore. Waring himself had gone so far in his recognition of the inevitable as to give Frances money to provide for the necessities of the journey. 'You will want things,' he said. 'I don't wish it to be thought that I kept you like a little beggar.'

'I am not like a little beggar, papa,' cried Frances, with an indignation which scarcely any of the more serious grievances of her life had called forth. She had always supposed him to be pleased with the British neatness, the modest, girlish costumes which she had procured for herself by instinct, and which made this girl, who knew nothing of England, so characteristically an English girl. This proof of the man's ignorance—which Frances ignorantly supposed to mean entire indifference to her appearance—went to her heart. 'And it is impossible to get things here,' she added, with her usual anxious penitence for her impatience.

'You can do it in Paris, then,' he said. 'I suppose you have enough of the instincts of your sex to buy clothes in Paris.'

Girls are not fond of hearing of the instincts of their sex. She turned away with a speechless vexation and distress which it pleased him to think rudeness.

'But she keeps the money all the same,' he said to himself.

Thus it became very apparent that the departure of Frances was desirable, and that she could not go too soon. But there were still inevitable delays. Strange! that when love embittered made her stay intolerable, the washerwoman should have compelled it. But to Frances, for the moment, everything in life was strange.

And not the least strange was the way in which Markham, whom she liked, but did not understand—the odd, little, shabby, unlovely personage, who looked like anything in the world but an individual of importance—was received by the little world of Bordighera. At the little church on Sunday there was a faint stir when he came in, and one lady pointed him out to another as the small audience filed out. The English landlady at the hotel spoke of him continually. Lord Markham was now the authority whom she quoted on all subjects. Even Domenico said 'meelord' with a relish. And as for the Durants, their enthusiasm was boundless. Tasie, not yet quite recovered from the excitement of Constance's arrival, lost her self-control altogether when Markham appeared. It was so good of him to come to church, she said; such an example for the people at the hotels! And so nice to lose so little time in coming to call upon papa. Of course, papa, as the clergyman, would have called upon him as soon as it was known where he was staying. But it was so pretty of Lord Markham to conform to foreign ways and make the first visit. 'We knew it must be your doing, Frances,' she said, with grateful delight.

'But, indeed, it was not my doing. It is Constance who makes him come,' Frances cried.

Constance, indeed, insisted upon his company everywhere. She took him not only to the Durants, but to the bungalow up among the olive woods, which they found in great excitement, and where the appearance of Lord Markham partially failed of its effect, a greater hero and stranger being there. George Gaunt, the General's youngest son, the chief subject of his mother's talk, the one of her children about whom she always had something to say, had arrived the day before, and in his presence even a living lord sank into a secondary place. Mrs. Gaunt had been the first to see the little party coming along by the terraces of the olive woods. She had, long, long ago, formed plans in her imagination of what might ensue when George came home. She ran out to meet them with her hands extended. 'Oh Frances, I am so glad to see you! Only fancy what has happened. George has come!'

'I am so glad,' said Frances, who was the first. She was more used to the winding of those terraces, and then she had not so much to talk of as Constance and Markham. Her face lighted up with pleasure. 'How happy you must be!' she said, kissing the old lady affectionately. 'Is he well?'

'Oh, wonderfully well; so much better than I could have hoped. George, George, where are you? Oh, my dear, I am so anxious that you should meet! I want you to like him,' Mrs. Gaunt said.

Almost for the first time there came a sting of pain to Frances' heart. She had heard a great deal of George Gaunt. She had thought of him more than of any other stranger. She had wondered what he would be like, and smiled to herself at his mother's too evident anxiety to bring them together, with a slight, not disagreeable flutter of interest in her own consciousness. And now here he was, and she was going away! It seemed a sort of spite of fortune, a tantalising of circumstances; though, to be sure, she did not know whether she should like him, or if Mrs. Gaunt's hopes might bear any fruit. Still, it was the only outlet her imagination had ever had, and it had amused and given her a pleasant fantastic glimpse now and then into something that might be more exciting than the calm round of every day.

She stood on the little grassy terrace which surrounded the house, looking towards the open door, but not taking any step towards it, waiting for the hero to appear. The house was low and broad, with a veranda round it, planted in the midst of the olive groves, where there was a little clearing, and looking down upon the sea. Frances paused there, with her face towards the house, and saw coming out from under the shadow of the veranda, with a certain awkward celerity, the straight, slim figure of the young Indian officer, his mother's hero, and, in a visionary sense, her own. She did not advance—she could not tell why—but waited till he should come up, while his mother turned round, beckoning to him. This was how it was that Constance and Markham arrived upon the scene before the introduction was fully accomplished. Frances held out her hand, and he took it, coming forward; but already his eyes had travelled over her head to the other pair arriving, with a look of inquiry and surprise. He let Frances' hand drop as soon as he had touched it, and turned towards the other, who was much more attractive than Frances. Constance, who missed nothing, gave him a glance, and then turned to his mother. 'We brought our brother to see you,' she said (as Frances had not presence of mind to do). 'Lord Markham, Mrs. Gaunt. But we have come at an inappropriate moment, when you are occupied.'

'Oh no! It is so kind of you to come. This is my son George, Miss Waring. He arrived last night. I have so wanted him to meet——' She did not say Frances; but she looked at the little girl, who was quite eclipsed and in the background, and then hurriedly added, 'your—family: whose name he knows, as such friends! And how kind of Lord Markham to come all this way!'

She was not accustomed to lords, and the mother's mind jumped at once to the vain, but so usual idea, that this lord, who had himself sought the acquaintance, might be of use to her son. She brought forward George, who was a little dazzled too; and it was not till the party had been swept into the veranda, where the family sat in the evening, that Mrs. Gaunt became aware that Frances had followed, the last of the train, and had seated herself on the outskirts of the group, no one paying any heed to her. Even then, she was too much under the influence of the less known visitors to do anything to put this right.

'I am delighted that you think me kind,' said Markham, in answer to the assurances which Mrs. Gaunt kept repeating, not knowing what to say. 'My step-father is not of that opinion at all. Neither will you be, I fear, when you know my mission. I have come for Frances.

'For Frances!' she cried, with a little suppressed scream of dismay.

'Ah, I said you would not be of that opinion long,' Markham said.

'Is Frances going away?' said the old General. 'I don't think we can stand that. Eh, George? that is not what your mother promised you. Frances is all we have got to remind us that we were young once. Waring must hear reason. He must not let her go away.'

'Frances is going; but Constance stays,' interposed that young lady. 'General, I hope you will adopt me in her stead.'

'That I will,' said the old soldier; 'that is, I will adopt you in addition, for we cannot give up Frances. Though, if it is only for a short visit, if you pledge yourself to bring her back again, I suppose we will have to give our consent.'

'Not I,' said Mrs. Gaunt under her breath. She whispered to her son, 'Go and talk to her. This is not Frances; *that* is Frances,' leaning over his shoulder.

George did not mean to shake off her hand; but he made a little impatient movement, and turned the other way to Constance, to whom he made some confused remark.

All the conversation was about Frances; but she took no part in it, nor did any one turn to her to ask her own opinion. She sat on the edge of the veranda, half hidden by the luxuriant growth of a rose which covered one of the pillars, and looked out rather wistfully, it must be allowed, over the gray clouds of olives in the foreground, to the blue of the sea beyond. It was twilight under the shade of the veranda; but outside, a subdued daylight, on the turn towards night. The little talk about her was very flattering, but somehow it did not have the effect it might have had; for though they all spoke of her as of so much importance, they left her out with one consent. Not exactly with one consent. Mrs. Gaunt, standing up, looking from one to another, hurt—though causelessly—beyond expression by the careless movement of her newly-returned boy, would have gone to Frances, had she not been held by some magnetic attraction which emanated from the others—the lord who might be of use—the young lady, whose careless ease and self-confidence were dazzling to simple people.

Neither the General nor his wife could realise that she was merely Frances' sister, Waring's daughter. She was the sister of Lord Markham. She was on another level altogether from the little girl who had been so pleasant to them all, and so sweet. They were very sorry that Frances was going away; but the other one required attention, had to be thought of, and put in the chief place. As for Frances, who knew them all so well, she would not mind. And thus even Mrs. Gaunt directed her attention to the new-comer.

Frances thought it was all very natural, and exactly what she wished. She was glad, very glad that they should take to Constance; that she should make friends with all the old friends who to herself had been so tender and kind. But there was one thing in which she could not help but feel a little disappointed, disconcerted, cast down. She had looked forward to George. She had thought of this new element in the quiet village life with a pleasant flutter of her heart. It had been natural to think of him as falling more or less to her own share, partly because it would be so in the fitness of things, she being the youngest of all the society—the girl, as he would be the boy; and partly because of his mother's fond talk, which was full of innocent hints of her hopes. That George should come when she was just going away, was bad enough; but that they should have met like this, that he should have touched her hand almost without looking at her, that he should not have had the most momentary desire to make acquaintance with Frances, whose name he must have heard so often, that gave her a real pang. To be sure, it was only a pang of the imagination. She had not fallen in love with his photograph, which did not represent an Adonis; and it was something, half a brother, half a comrade, not (consciously) a lover, for which Frances had looked in him. But yet it gave her a very strange, painful, deserted sensation when she saw him look over her head at Constance, and felt her hand dropped as soon as taken. She smiled a little at herself, when she came to think of it, saying to herself that she knew very well Constance was far more charming, far more pretty than she, and that it was only natural she should take the first place. Frances was ever anxious to yield to her the first place. But she could not help that quiver of involuntary feeling. She was hurt, though it was all so natural. It was natural, too, that she should be hurt, and that nobody should take any notice—all the most everyday things in the world.

George Gaunt came to the Palazzo next day. He came in the afternoon with his father, to be introduced to Waring; and he came again after dinner—for these neighbours did not entertain each other at the working-day meals, so to speak, but only in light ornamental ways, with cups of tea or black coffee —with both his parents to spend the evening. He was thin and of a slightly greenish tinge in his brownness, by reason of India and the illnesses he had gone through; but his slim figure had a look of power; and he had kind eyes, like his mother's, under the hollows of his brows: not a handsome young man, yet not at all common or ordinary, with a soldier's neatness and upright bearing. To see Markham beside him with his insignificant figure, his little round head tufted with sandy hair, his one-sided look with his glass in his eye, or his ear tilted up on the opposite side, was as good as a sermon upon race and its advantages. For Markham was the fifteenth lord; and the Gaunts were, it was understood, of as good as no family at all. Captain George from that first evening had neither ear nor eye for any one but Constance. He followed her about shyly wherever she moved; he stood over her when she sat down. He said little, for he was shy, poor fellow; yet he did sometimes hazard a remark, which was always subsidiary or responsive to something she had said.

Mrs. Gaunt's distress at this subversion of all she had intended was great. She got Frances into a corner of the loggia while the others talked, and thrust upon her a pretty sandal-wood box inlaid with ivory, one of those that George had brought from India. 'It was always intended for you, dear,' she said. 'Of course he could not venture to offer it himself.'

'But, dear Mrs. Gaunt,' said Frances, with a low laugh, in which all her little bitterness evaporated, 'I don't think he has so much as seen my face. I am sure he would not know me if we met in the road.'

'Oh, my dear child,' cried poor Mrs. Gaunt, 'it has been such a disappointment to me. I have just cried my eyes out over it. To think you should not have taken to each other after all my dreams and hopes.'

Frances laughed again; but she did not say that there had been no failure of interest on her side. She said, 'I hope he will soon be quite strong and well. You will write and tell me about everybody.'

'Indeed I will. Oh Frances, is it possible that you are going so soon? It does not seem natural that you should be going, and that your sister should stay.'

'Not very natural,' said Frances, with a composure which was less natural still. 'But since it is to be, I hope you will see as much of her as you can, dear Mrs. Gaunt, and be as kind to her as you have been to me.'

'Oh, my dear, there is little doubt that I shall see a great deal of her,' said the mother, with a glance towards the other group, of which Constance was the central figure. She was lying back in the big wicker-work chair; with the white hands and arms, which showed out of sleeves shorter than were usual in Bordighera, very visible in the dusk, accompanying her talk by lively gestures. The young captain stood like a sentinel a little behind her. His mother's glance was half vexation and half pleasure. She thought it was a great thing for a girl to have secured the attentions of her boy, and a very sad thing for the girl who had not secured them. Any doubt that Constance might not be grateful, had not yet entered her thoughts. Frances, though she was so much less experienced, saw the matter in another light.

'You must remember,' she said, 'that she has been brought up very differently. She has been used to a great deal of admiration, Markham says.'

'And now you will come in for that, and she must take what she can get here.' Mrs. Gaunt's tone when she said this showed that she felt, whoever was the loser, it would not be Constance. Frances shook her head.

'It will be very different with me. And dear Mrs. Gaunt, if Constance should not—do as you wish——'

'My dear, I will not interfere. It never does any good when a mother interferes,' Mrs. Gaunt said hurriedly. Her mind was incapable of pursuing the idea which Frances so timidly had endeavoured to suggest. And what could the girl do more?

Next day she went away. Her father, pale and stern, took leave of her in the bookroom with an air of offence and displeasure which went to Frances' heart. 'I will not come to the station. You will have, no doubt, everybody at the station. I don't like greetings in the market-places,' he said.

'Papa,' said Frances, 'Mariuccia knows everything. I am sure she will be careful. She says she will not trouble Constance more than is necessary. And I hope——'

'Oh, we shall do very well, I don't doubt.'

'I hope you will forgive me, papa, for all I may have done wrong. I hope you will not miss me; that is, I hope—oh, I hope you will miss me a little, for it breaks my heart when you look at me like that.'

'We shall do very well,' said Waring, not looking at her at all, 'both you and I.'

'And you have nothing to say to me, papa?'

'Nothing—except that I hope you will like your new life and find everything pleasant. Good-bye, my dear; it is time you were going.'

And that was all. Everybody was at the station, it was true, which made it no place for leave-takings; and Frances did not know that he watched the train from the loggia till the white plume of steam disappeared with a roar in the next of those many tunnels that spoil the beautiful Cornice road. Constance walked back in the midst of the Gaunts and Durants, looking, as she always did, the mistress of the situation. But neither did Frances, blotted out in the corner of the carriage, crying behind her veil and her handkerchief, leaving all she knew behind her, understand with what a tug at her heart Constance saw the familiar little ugly face of her brother for the last time at the carriage window, and turned back to the deadly monotony of the shelter she had sought for herself, with a sense that everything was over, and she herself completely deserted, like a wreck upon a desolate shore.

## CHAPTER XVII

'YES, I hope you will come and see me often. Oh yes, I shall miss my sister; but then I shall have all the more of papa. Good-night. Good-night, Captain Gaunt. No; I don't sketch; that was Frances. I don't know the country either. It was my sister who knew it. I am quite ignorant and useless. Good-night.'

Waring, who was on the loggia, heard this in the clear tones of his only remaining companion. He heard her come in afterwards with a step more distinct than that of Frances, as her voice carried farther. He said to himself that everything was more distinct about this girl, and he was glad that she was coming, glad of some relief from the depression which overcame him against his will. . She came across one room after another, and out upon the loggia, throwing herself down listlessly in the usurped chair. It did not occur to him that she was unaware of his presence, and he was surprised that she said nothing. But after a minute or two, there could be no doubt why it was that Constance did not speak. There was no loud outburst of emotion, but a low suppressed sound, which it was impossible to mistake. She said, after a moment, to herself, 'What a fool I am!' But even this reflection did not stem the tide. A sensation of utter solitude had seized upon her. She was abandoned, among strangers; and though she had so much experience of the world, it was not of this world that Constance had any knowledge. Had she been left alone among a new tribe of people unknown to her, she would not have been afraid! Court or camp would have had no alarms for her; but the solitude, broken only by the occasional appearance of these rustic companions; the simple young soldier, who was going to bestow his heart upon her, an entirely undesired gift; the anxious mother, who was about to mount guard over her at a distance; the polite old beau in the background. Was it possible that the existence she knew had altogether receded from Constance, and left her with such companions alone? She was not thinking of her father, neither of himself nor of his possible presence, which was of little importance to her. After a while she sat upright and passed her handkerchief quickly over her face. 'It is my own fault,' she said, still to herself; 'I might have known.'

'You don't see, Constance, that I am here.'

She started, and pulled herself up in a moment. 'Oh, are you there, papa? No, I didn't see you. I didn't think of any one being here. Well, they are gone. Everybody came to see Frances off, as you divined. She bore up very well; but, of course, it was a little sad for her, leaving everything she knows.'

'You were crying a minute ago, Constance.'

'Was I? Oh, well, that was nothing. Girls cry, and it doesn't mean much. You know women well enough to know that.'

'Yes, I know women—enough to say the ordinary things about them,' said Waring; 'but perhaps I don't know you, which is of far more consequence just now.'

'There is not much in me to know,' said the girl in a light voice. 'I am just like other girls. I am apt to cry when I see people crying. Frances sobbed—like a little foolish thing; for why should she cry? She is going to see the world. Did you ever feel, when you came here first, a sort of horror seize upon you, as if—as if—as if you were lost in a savage wilderness, and would never see a human face again?'

'No; I cannot say I ever felt that.'

'No, to be sure,' cried Constance. 'What ridiculous nonsense I am talking! A savage wilderness! with all these houses about, and the hotels on the beach. I mean—didn't you feel as if you would like to run violently down a steep place into the sea?' Then she stopped, and laughed. 'It was the swine that did that.'

'It has never occurred to me to take that means of settling matters; and yet I understand you,' he said gravely. 'You have made a mistake. You thought you were philosopher enough to give up the world; and it turns out that you are not. But you need not cry, for it is not too late. You can change your mind.'

'I—change my mind! Not for the world, papa! Do you think I would give them the triumph of supposing that I could not do without them, that I was obliged to go back? Not for the world.'

'I understand the sentiment,' he said. 'Still, between these two conditions of mind, it is rather unfortunate for you, my dear. I do not see any middle course.'

'Oh yes, there is a middle course. I can make myself very comfortable here; and that is what I mean to do. Papa, if you had not found it out, I should not have told you. I hope you are not offended?'

'Oh no, I am not offended,' he said, with a short laugh. 'It is perhaps a pity that everybody has been put to so much trouble for what gives you so little satisfaction. That is the worst of it; these mistakes affect so many others besides one's self.'

Constance evidently had a struggle with herself to accept this reproof; but she made no immediate reply. After a while: 'Frances will be a little strange at first; but she will like it by and by; and it is only right she should have her share,' she said softly. 'I have been wondering,' she went on, with a laugh that was somewhat forced, 'whether mamma will respect her individuality at all; or if she will put her altogether into my place? I wonder if—that man I told you of, papa——'

'Well, what of him?' said Waring rather sharply.

'I wonder if he will be turned over to Frances too? It would be droll. Mamma is not a person to give up any of her plans, if she can help it; and you have brought up Frances so very well, papa; she is so docile—and so obedient——'

'You think she will accept your old lover, or your old wardrobe, or anything that offers? I don't think she is so well brought up as that.'

'I did not mean to insult my sister,' cried Constance, springing to her feet. 'She is so well brought up, that she accepted whatever you chose to say to her, forgetting that she was a woman, that she was a lady.'

Waring's face grew scarlet in the darkness. 'I hope,' he said, 'that I am incapable of forgetting on any provocation that my daughter is a lady.'

'You mean me!' she cried, breathless. 'Oh, I can——' But here she stopped. 'Papa,' she resumed, 'what good will it do us to quarrel? I don't want to quarrel. Instead of setting yourself against me because I am poor Con, and not Frances, whom you love—— Oh, I think you might be good to me just at this moment; for I am very lonely, and I don't know what I am good for, and I think my heart will break.'

She went to him quickly, and flung herself upon his shoulder, and cried. Waring was perhaps more embarrassed than touched by this appeal; but after all, she was his child, and he was sorry for her. He put his arm round her, and said a few soothing words. 'You may be good for a great deal, if you choose,' he said; 'and if you will believe me, my dear, you will find that by far the most amusing way. You have more capabilities than Frances; you are much better educated than she is—at least I suppose so, for she was not educated at all.'

'How do you mean that it will be more amusing? I don't expect to be amused; all that is over,' said Constance in a dolorous tone.

He was so much like her, that he paused for a moment to consider whether he should be angry, but decided against it, and laughed instead. 'You are not complimentary,' he said. 'What I mean is, that if you sit still and think over your deprivations, you will inevitably be miserable; whereas, if you exert yourself a little, and make the best of the situation, you will very likely extract something that is amusing out of it. I have seen it happen so often in my experience.'

'Ah,' said Constance, considering. And then she withdrew from him and went back to her chair. 'I thought, perhaps, you meant something more positive. There are perhaps possibilities: Frances would have thought it wrong to look out for amusement—that must have been because you trained her so.'

'Not altogether. Frances does not require so much amusement as you do. It is so in everything. One individual wants more sleep, more food, more delight than others.'

'Yes, yes,' she cried; 'that is like me. Some people are more alive than others; that is what you mean, papa.'

'I am not sure that it is what I mean; but if you like to take it so, I have no objection. And in that view, I recommend you to live, Constance. You will find it a great deal more amusing than to mope; and it will be much pleasanter to me.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I was considering. Perhaps what I mean will be not the same as what you mean. I will not do it in Frances' way; but still I will take your advice, papa. I am sure you are right in what you say.'

'I am glad you think so, my dear. If you cannot have everything you want, take what you can get. It is the only true philosophy.'

'Then I will be a true philosopher,' she said with a laugh. The laugh was more than a mere recovery of spirits. It broke out again after a little, as if with a sense of something irresistibly comic. 'But I must not interfere too much with Mariuccia, it appears. She knows what you like better than I do. I am only to look wise when she submits her *menu*, as if I knew all about it. I am very good at looking as if I knew all about it. By the way, do you know there is no piano? I should like to have a piano, if I might.'

'That will not be very difficult,' he said. 'Can you play?'

At which she laughed once more, with all her easy confidence restored. 'You shall hear, when you get me a piano. Thanks, papa; you have quite restored me to myself. I can't knit you socks, like Frances; and I am not so clever about the mayonnaises; but still I am not altogether devoid of intellect. And now, we completely understand each other. Good-night.'

'This is sudden,' he said. 'Good-night, if you think it is time for that ceremony.'

'It is time for me; I am a little tired; and I have got some alterations to make in my room, now that—now that—at present when I am quite settled and see my way.'

He did not understand what she meant, and he did not inquire. It was of very little consequence. Indeed it was perhaps well that she should go and leave him to think of everything. It was not a month yet since the day when he had met that idiot Mannering on the road. To be sure, there was no proof that the idiot Mannering was the cause of all that had ensued. But at least it was he who had first disturbed the calm which Waring hoped was to have been eternal. He sat down to think, almost grateful to Constance for taking herself away. He thought a little of Frances hurrying along into the unknown, the first great journey she had ever taken —and such a journey, away from everything and everybody she knew. Poor little Fan! he thought a little about her; but he thought a great deal about himself. Would it ever be possible to return to that peace which had been so profound, which had ceased to appear capable of disturbance? The circumstances were all very different now. Frances, who would think it her duty to write to him often, was henceforth to be her mother's companion, reflecting, no doubt, the sentiments of a mind, to escape from the companionship of which he had given up the world and (almost) his own species. And Constance, though she had elected to be his companion, would no doubt all the same write to her mother; and everything that he did and said, and all the circumstances of his life, would thus be laid open. He felt an impatience beyond words of that dutifulness of women, that propriety in which girls are trained, which makes them write letters. Why should they write letters? But it was impossible to prevent it. His wife would become a sort of distant witness of everything he did. She would know what he liked for dinner, the wine he preferred, how many baths he took. To describe how this thought annoyed him would be impossible. He had forgotten to warn Frances that her father was not to be discussed with my lady. But what was the use of saying anything, when letters would come and go continually from the one house to the other? And he would be compelled to put up with it, though nothing could be more unpleasant. If these girls had been boys, this would not have happened. It was perhaps the first time Waring had felt himself within reach of such a wish, for boys were far more objectionable to his fine taste than girls, gave more trouble, and were less agreeable to have about one. In the present circumstances, however, he could not but feel they would have been less embarrassing. Constance might grow tired, indeed, of that unprofitable exercise of letter-writing. But Frances, he felt sure, would in all cases be dutiful, and would not grow tired. She would write to him perhaps (he shivered) every day; at least every week; and she would think it her duty to tell him everything that happened, and she would require that he should reply. But this, except once or twice, perhaps, to let her down easily, he was resolved that nothing should induce him to do.

Constance was neither tired nor sleepy when she went to her room. She had never betrayed the consciousness in any way, being high-bred and courteous when it did not interfere with her comfort to be so; yet she had divined that Frances had given up her room to her. This would have touched the heart of many people, but to Constance it was almost an irritation. She could not think why her sister had done it, except with that intention of self-martyrdom with which so many good people exasperate their neighbours. She would have been quite as comfortable in the blue room, and she would have liked it better. Now that Frances was safely gone and her feelings could not be hurt any more, Constance had set her heart upon altering it to her own pleasure, making it bear no longer the impress of Frances' mind, but of her own. She took down a number of the pictures which Frances had thought so much of, and softly pulled the things about, and changed it more than any one could have supposed a room could be changed. Then she sat down to think. The depression which had seized upon her when she had felt that all was over, that the door was closed upon her, and no place of repentance any longer possible, did not return at first. Her father's words, which she understood in a sense not intended by him, gave her a great deal of amusement as she thought them over. She did not conceal from herself the fact that there might ensue circumstances in which she should quote them to him to justify herself. 'Frances does not require so much amusement as you do. One individual requires more sleep, more food, more delight than another.' She laid this dangerous saying up in her mind with much glee, laughing to herself under her breath: 'If you cannot get what you want, you must take what you can get.' How astounded he would be if it should ever be necessary to put him in mind of these dogmas—which were so true! Her father's arguments, indeed, which were so well meant, did not suit the case of Constance. She had been in a better state of mind when she had felt herself to awake, as it were, on the edge of this desert, into which, in her impatience, she had flung herself, and saw that there was no escape for her, that she had been taken at her word, that she was to be permitted to work out her own will, and that no one would forcibly interfere to restore all her delights, to smooth the way for her to return. She had expected this, if not consciously, yet with a strong unexpressed conviction. But when she had seen Markham's face disappear, and realised that he was gone, actually gone, and had left her to exist as she could in the wilderness to which she had flown, her young perverse soul had been swept as by a tempest.

After a while, when she had gone through that little interview with her father,—when she had executed her little revolution, and had seated herself in the quiet of the early night to think again over the whole matter,—the pang returned, as every pang does. It was not yet ten o'clock, the hour at which she might have been setting out to a succession of entertainments under her mother's wing; but she had nothing better to amuse her than to alter the arrangement of a few old chairs, to draw aside a faded curtain, and then to betake herself to bed, though it was too early to sleep. There were sounds of voices still audible without—people singing, gossiping, enjoying, on the stone benches on the Punto—just those same delights of society which happy people on the verge of a new season were beginning to enjoy. But Constance did not feel much sympathy with the villagers, who were foreigners, whom she felt to be annoying and intrusive, making a noise under her windows, when, as it so happened, she had nothing to do but to go to sleep. When she looked out from the window and saw the pale sky spreading clear over the sea, she could think of nothing but Frances rushing along through the night, with Markham taking such care of her, hastening to London, to all that was worth living for. No doubt that little thing was still crying in her corner, in her folly and ignorance regretting her village. Oh, if they could but have changed places! To think of sitting opposite to Markham, with the soft night air blowing in her face, devouring the way, seeing the little towns flash past, the morning dawn upon France, the long levels of the flat country sweep along, then Paris, London, at last! She shut the *persiani* almost violently with a hand that trembled, and looked round the four walls which shut her in, with again an impulse almost of despair. She felt like a wild creature newly caged, shut in there, to be kept within bolts and bars, to pace up and down, and beat against the walls of her prison, and never more to go free.

But this fit being more violent, did not go so deep as the unspeakable sense of loneliness which had overwhelmed her soul at first. She sprang up from it with the buoyancy of her age, and said to herself what her father had said: 'If you cannot get what you want, you must take what you can get.' There was yet a little amusement to be had out of this arid place. She had her father's sanction for making use of her opportunities; anything was better than to mope; and for her it was a necessity to live. She laughed a little under her breath once more, as she came back to this more reassuring thought, and so lay down on her sister's bed with a satisfaction in the thought that it had not taken her any trouble to supplant Frances, and a mischievous smile about the corners of her mouth; although, after all, the thought of the travellers came over her again as she closed her eyes, and she ended by crying herself to sleep.

## CHAPTER XVIII

Captain Gaunt called next day to bring, he said, a message from his mother. She sent Mr. Waring a newspaper which she thought he might like to see—an English weekly newspaper, which some of her correspondents had sent her, in which there was an article—— He did not give a very clear account of this, nor make it distinctly apparent why Waring should be specially interested; and as a matter of fact, the newspaper found its way to the waste-paper basket, and interested nobody. But, no doubt, Mrs. Gaunt's intentions had been excellent. When the young soldier arrived, there was a carriage at the door, and Constance had her hat on. 'We are going,' she said, 'to San Remo, to see about a piano. Do you know San Remo? Oh, I forgot you are as much a stranger as I am; you don't know anything. What a good thing that there are two ignorant persons! We will keep each other in countenance, and they will be compelled to make all kinds of expeditions to show us everything.'

'That will be a wonderful chance for me,' said the young man, 'for nobody would take so much trouble for me alone.'

'How can you tell that? Miss Tasie, I should think, would be an excellent cicerone,' said Constance. She said it with a light laugh of suggestion, meaning to imply, though, of course, she had *said* nothing, that Tasie would be too happy to put herself at Captain Gaunt's disposition; a suggestion which he, too, received with a laugh—for this is one of the points upon which both boys and girls are always ungenerous.

'And failing Miss Tasie,' said Constance, 'suppose you come with papa and me? They say it is a pretty drive. They say, of course, that everything here is lovely, and that the Riviera is paradise. Do you find it so?'

'I can fancy circumstances in which I should find it so,' said the young soldier.

'Ah, yes; every one can do that. I can fancy circumstances in which Bond Street would be paradise—oh, very easily! It is not far from paradise at any time.'

'That is a heaven of which I know very little, Miss Waring.'

'Ah then, you must learn. The true Elysian fields are in London in May. If you don't know that, you can form no idea of happiness. An exile from all delights gives you the information, and you may be sure it is true.'

'Why, then, Miss Waring, if you think so——'

'Am I here? Oh, that is easily explained. I have a sister.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Ah, I understand you have heard a great deal about my sister. I suffer here from being compared with her. I am not nearly so good, so wise, as Frances. But is that my fault, Captain Gaunt? You are impartial; you are a newcomer. If I could, I would be as nice as Frances, don't you believe?'

The young man gave Constance a look, which, indeed, she expected, and said with confusion, 'I don't see—any need for improvement,' and blushed as near crimson as was possible over the greenish brown of his Indian colour.

Constance for her part did not blush. She laughed, and made him an almost imperceptible curtsey. The ways of flirtation are not original, and all the parallels of the early encounters might be stereotyped, as everybody knows.

'You are very amiable,' she said; 'but then you don't know Frances, and your opinion, accordingly, is less valuable. I did not ask you, however, to believe me to be equal to my sister, but only to believe that I would be as nice if I could. However, all that is no explanation. We have a mother, you know, in England. We are, unfortunately, that sad thing, a household divided against itself.'

Captain Gaunt was not prepared for such confidences. He grew still a little browner with embarrassment, and muttered something about being very sorry, not knowing what to say.

'Oh, there is not very much to be sorry about. Papa enjoys himself in his way here, and mamma is very happy at home. The only thing is that we must each have our turn, you know—that is only fair. So Frances has gone to mamma, and here am I in Bordighera. We are each dreadfully out of our element. Her friends condemn me, to begin with, as if it were my fault that I am not like her; and my friends, perhaps—— But no; I don't think so. Frances is so good, so nice, so everything a girl ought to be.'

At this she laughed softly again; and young Gaunt's consciousness that his mother's much-vaunted Frances was the sort of girl to please old ladies rather than young men, a prim, little, smooth, correct maiden, with not the least 'go' in her, took additional force and certainty. Whereas—— But he had no words in which to express his sense of the advantages on the other side.

'You must find it,' he said, knowing nothing more original to say, 'dreadfully dull living here.'

'I have not found anything as yet; I have only just come. I am no more than a few days older than you are. We can compare notes as time goes on. But perhaps you don't mean to stay very long in these abodes of the blest?'

'I don't know that I did intend it. But I shall stay now as long as ever I can,' said the young man. Then—for he was shy—he added hastily, 'It is a long time since I have seen my people, and they like to have me.'

'Naturally. But you need not have spoiled what looked like a very pretty compliment by adding that. Perhaps you didn't mean it for a compliment? Oh, I don't mind at all. It is much more original, if you didn't mean it. Compliments are such common coin. But I don't pretend to despise them, as some girls do; and I don't like to see them spoiled,' Constance said seriously.

The young man looked at her with consternation. After a while, his moustache expanded into a laugh, but it was a confused laugh, and he did not understand. Still less did he know how to reply. Constance had been used to sharper wits, who took her at half a word; and she was half angry to be thus obliged to explain.

'We are going to San Remo, as I told you,' she said. 'I am waiting for my father. We are going to look for a piano. Frances is not musical, so there is no piano in the house. You must come too, and give your advice. Oh, are you ready, papa? Captain Gaunt, who does not know San Remo, and who does know music, is coming with us to give us his advice.'

The young soldier stammered forth that to go to San Remo was the thing he most desired in the world. 'But I don't think my advice will be good for much,' he said, conscientiously. 'I do a little on the violin; but as for pretending to be a judge of a piano——'

'Come; we are all ready,' said Constance, leading the way.

Waring had to let the young fellow precede him, to see him get into the carriage without any articulate murmur. As a matter of fact, a sort of stupor seized the father, altogether unaccustomed to be the victim of accidents. Frances might have lived by his side till she was fifty before she would have thought of inviting a stranger to be of their party—a stranger, a young man, which was a class of being with which Waring had little patience—a young soldier, proverbially frivolous, and occupied with foolish matters. Young Gaunt respectfully left to his senior the place beside Constance; but he placed himself opposite to her, and kept his eyes upon her with a devout attention, which Waring would have thought ridiculous had he not been irritated by it. The young fellow was a great deal too much absorbed to contribute much to the amusement of the party; and it irritated Waring beyond measure to see his eyes gleam from under his eyebrows, opening wider with delight, half closing with laughter, the ends of his moustache going up to his ears. Waring, an impartial spectator, was not so much impressed by his daughter's wit. He thought he had heard a great deal of the same before, or even better, surely better, for he could recollect that he had in his day been charmed by a similar treatment, which must have been much lighter in touch, much less commonplace in subject, because—he was charmed. Thus we argue in our generations. In the meantime, young Gaunt, though he had not been without some experience, looked at Constance from under his brows, and listened as if to the utterances of the gods. If only they could have had it all to themselves; if only the old father had been out of the way!

The sunshine, the sea, the beautiful colour, the unexpected vision round every corner of another and another picturesque cluster of towns and roofs,—all that charm and variety which give to Italy above every country on earth the admixture of human interest, the endless chain of association which adds a grace to natural beauty,—made very little impression upon this young pair. She would have been amused and delighted by the exercise of her own power, and he would have been enthralled by her beauty, and what he considered her wit and high spirits, had their progress been along the dullest streets. It was only Waring's eyes, disgusted by the prospect before him of his daughter's little artifices, and young Gaunt's imbecile subjection, which turned with any special consciousness to the varying blues of the sea, to the endless developments of the landscape. Flirtation is one of the last things in the world to brook a spectator. Its little absurdities, which are so delightful to the actors in the drama, and which at a distance the severest critic may smile at and forgive, excite the wrath of a too close looker-on, in a way quite disproportioned to their real offensiveness. The interchange of chatter which prevents, as that observer would say, all rational conversation, the attempts to charm, which are so transparent, the response of silly admiration, which is only another form of vanity—how profoundly sensible we all are of their folly! Had Constance taken as much pains to please her father, he would, in all probability, have yielded altogether to the spell; but he was angry, ashamed, furious, that she should address those wiles to the young stranger, and saw through him with a clear-sightedness which was exasperating. It was all the more exasperating that he could not tell what she meant by it. Was it possible that she had already formed an inclination towards this tawny young stranger? Had his bilious hues affected her imagination? Love at first sight is a very respectable emotion, and commands in many cases both sympathy and admiration. But no man likes to see the working of this sentiment in a woman who belongs to him. Had Constance fallen in love? He grew angry at the very suggestion, though breathed only in the recesses of his own mind. A girl who had been brought up in the world, who had seen all kinds of people, was it possible that she should fall a victim in a moment to the attractions of a young nobody—a young fellow who knew nothing but India? That he should be subjected, was simple enough; but Constance! Waring's brow clouded more and more. He kept silent, taking no part in the talk, and the young fools did not so much as remark it, but went on with their own absurdity more and more.

The transformation of a series of little Italian municipalities, although in their nature more towns than villages, rendered less rustic by the traditions of an exposed coast, and many a crisis of self-defence, into little modern towns full of hotels and tourists, is neither a pleasant nor a lovely process. San Remo in the old days, before Dr. Antonio made it known to the world, lay among its olive-gardens on the edge of the sea, which grew bluer and bluer as it crept to the feet of the human master of the soil, a delight to behold, a little picture which memory cherished. Wide promenades flanked with big hotels, with conventional gardens full of green bushes, and a kiosk for the band, make a very different prospect now. But then, in the old days, there could have been no music-sellers with pianos to let or sell; no famous English chemist with coloured bottles; no big shops in which travellers could be tempted. Constance forgot Captain Gaunt when she found herself in this atmosphere of the world. She began to remember things she wanted. 'Papa, if you don't despise it too much, you must let me do a little shopping,' she said.

She wanted a hat for the sun. She wanted some eau-de-Cologne. She wanted just to run into the jeweller's to see if the coral was good, to see if there were any peasant-ornaments which would be characteristic. At all this her father smiled somewhat grimly, taking it as a part of the campaign into which his daughter had chosen to enter for the overthrow of the young soldier. But Constance was perfectly sincere, and had forgotten her campaign in the new and warmer interest.

'So long as you do not ask me to attend you from shop to shop,' he said.

'Oh no; Captain Gaunt will come,' said Constance.

Captain Gaunt was not a victim who required many wiles. He was less amusing than she had hoped, in so far that he had given in, in an incredibly short space of time. He was now in a condition to be trampled on at her pleasure, and this was unexciting. A longer resistance would have been much more to Constance's mind. Captain Gaunt accompanied her to all the shops. He helped her with his advice about the piano, bending his head over her as she ran through a little air or two, and struck a few chords on one after the other of the music-seller's stock. They were not very admirable instruments, but one was found that would do.

'You can bring your violin,' Constance said; 'we must try to amuse ourselves a little.' This was before her father left them, and he heard it with a groan.

Waring took a silent walk round the bay while the purchases went on. He thought of past experiences, of the attraction which a shop has for women. Frances, no doubt, after a little of her mother's training, would be the same. She would find out the charms of shopping. He had not even her return to look forward to, for she would not be the same Frances who had left him, when she came back. *When* she came back?—if she ever came back. The same Frances, never; perhaps not even a changed Frances. Her mother would quickly see what an advantage she had in getting the daughter whom her husband had brought up. She would not give her back; she would turn her into a second Constance. There had been a time when Waring had concluded that Constance was amusing and Frances dull; but it must be remembered that he was under provocation now. If she had been amusing, it had not been for him. She had exerted herself to please a commonplace, undistinguished boy, with an air of being indifferent to everything else, which was beyond measure irritating to her father. And now she had got scent of shops, and would never be happy save when she was rushing from one place to another—to Mentone, to Nice perhaps, wherever her fancied wants might lead her. Waring discussed all this with himself as he rambled along, his nerves all set on edge, his taste revolted. Flirtations and shops—was he to be brought to this? he who had been free from domestic encumbrance, who had known nothing for so many years but a little ministrant, who never troubled him, who was ready when he wanted her, but never put forth herself as a restraint or an annoyance. He had advised Constance to take what good she could find in her life; but he had never imagined that this was the line she would take.

The drive home was scarcely more satisfactory. Young Gaunt had got a little courage by the episode of the shops. He ventured to tell her of the trifles he had brought with him from India, and to ask if Miss Waring would care to see them; and he described to her the progress he had made with his violin, and what his attainments were in music. Constance told him that the best thing he could do was to bring the said violin and all his music, so that they might see what they could do together. 'If you are not too far advanced for me,' she said with a laugh. 'Come in the morning, when we shall not be interrupted.'

Her father listened, but said nothing. His imagination immediately set before him the tuning and scraping, the clang of the piano, the shriek of the fiddle, and he himself only two rooms off, endeavouring in vain to collect his thoughts and do his work! Mr. Waring's work was not of the first importance, but still it was his work, and momentous to him. He bore, however, a countenance unmoved, if very grave, and even endured without a word the young man's entrance with them, the consultation about where the piano was to stand, and tea afterwards in the loggia. He did not himself want any tea; he left the young people to enjoy this refreshment together while he retired to his bookroom. But with only two rooms between, and with his senses quickened by displeasure, he heard their voices, the laughter, the continual flow of talk, even the little tinkle of the teacups—every sound. He had never been disturbed by Frances' tea; but then, except Tasie Durant, there had been nobody to share it, no son from the bungalow, no privileged messenger sent by his mother. Mrs. Gaunt's children, of whom she talked continually, had always been a nuisance, except to the sympathetic soul of Frances. But who could have imagined the prominence which they had assumed now?

Young Gaunt did not go away until shortly before dinner; and Constance, after accompanying him to the ante-room, went along the corridor singing, to her own room, to change her dress. Though her room (Frances' room that was) was at the extremity of the suite, her father heard her light voice running on in a little operatic air all the time she made her toilet. Had it been described in a book, he thought to himself it would have had a pretty sound. The girl's voice, sweet and gay, sounding through the house, the voice of happy youth brightening the dull life there, the voice of innocent content betraying its own satisfaction with existence—satisfaction in having a young fool to flirt with, and some trumpery shops to buy unnecessary appendages in! At dinner, however, she made fun of young Gaunt, and the morose father was a little mollified. 'It is rather dreadful for other people when there is an adoring mother in the background to think everything you do perfection,' Constance said. 'I don't think we shall make much of the violin.'

'These are subjects on which you can speak with more authority than I—both the violin and the mother,' said Waring.

'Oh,' she cried, 'you don't think mamma was one of the adoring kind, I hope! There may be things in her which might be mended; but she is not like that. She kept one in one's proper place. And as for the violin, I suspect he plays it like an old fiddler in the streets.'

'You have changed your mind about it very rapidly,' said Waring; but on the whole he was pleased. 'You seemed much interested both in the hero and the music, a little while ago.'

'Yes; was I not?' said Constance with perfect candour. 'And he took it all in, as if it were likely. These young men from India, they are very ingenuous. It seems wicked to take advantage of them, does it not?'

'More people are ingenuous than the young man from India. I intended to speak to you very seriously as soon as he was gone—to ask you——'

'What were my intentions?' cried Constance, with an outburst of the gayest laughter. 'Oh, what a pity I began! How sorry I am to have missed that! Do you think his mother will ask me, papa? It is generally the man, isn't it, who is questioned? and he says his intentions are honourable. Mine, I frankly allow, are not honourable.'

'No; very much the reverse, I should think. But it had better be clearly defined, for my satisfaction, Constance, which of you is true—the girl who cried over her loneliness last night, or she who made love to Captain Gaunt this morning——'

'No, papa; only was a little nice to him, because he is lonely too.'

'These delicacies of expression are too fine for me.——Who made the poor young fellow believe that she liked his society immensely, was much interested, counted upon him and his violin as her greatest pleasures?'

'You are going too far,' she said. 'I think the fiddle will be fun. When you play very badly and are a little conceited about it, you are always amusing. And as for Captain Gaunt—so long as he does not complain——'

'It is I who am complaining, Constance.'

'Well, papa—but why? You told me last night to take what I had, since I could not have what I want.'

'And you have acted upon my advice? With great promptitude, I must allow.'

'Yes,' she said with composure. 'What is the use of losing time? It is not my fault if there is somebody here quite ready. It amuses him too. And what harm am I doing? A girl can't be asked—except for fun—those disagreeable questions.'

'And therefore you think a girl can do—what would be dishonourable in a man.'

'Oh, you are so much too serious,' cried Constance. 'Are you always as serious as this? You laughed when I told you about Fanny Gervoise. Is it only because it is me that you find fault? And don't you think it is a little too soon for parental interference? The Gaunts would be much surprised. They would think you were afraid for my peace of mind, papa —as her parents were afraid for Miss Tasie.'

This moved the stern father to a smile. He had thought that Constance did not appreciate that joke; but the girl had more humour than he supposed. 'I see,' he said, 'you will have your own way; but remember, Constance, I cannot allow it to go too far.'

How could he prevent it going as far as she pleased? she said to herself with a little scorn, when she was alone. Parents may be medieval if they will; but the means have never yet been invented of preventing a woman, when she is so minded and has the power in her hands, from achieving her little triumph over a young man's heart.

## CHAPTER XIX

'WHERE is George? I scarcely ever see him,' said the General, in querulous tones. 'He is always after that girl of Waring's. Why don't you try to keep him at home?'

Mrs. Gaunt did not say that she had done her best to keep him at home, but found her efforts unsuccessful. She said apologetically, 'He has so very little to amuse him here; and the music, you know, is a great bond.'

'He plays like a beginner; and she, like a—like a—as well as a professional. I don't understand what kind of bond that can be.'

'So much the greater a compliment is it to George that she likes his playing,' responded the mother promptly.

'She likes to make a fool of him, I think,' the General said; 'and you help her on. I don't understand your tactics. Women generally like to keep their sons free from such entanglements; and after getting him safely out of India, where every man is bound to fall into mischief——'

'Oh, my dear,' said Mrs. Gaunt, 'if it ever should come to that—think, what an excellent connection. I wish it had been Frances; I do wish it had been Frances. I had always set my heart on that. But the connection would be the same.'

'You knew nothing about the connection when you set your heart on Frances. And I can't help thinking there is something odd about the connection. Why should that girl have come here, and why should the other one be spirited away like a transformation scene?'

'Well, my dear, it is in the peerage,' said Mrs. Gaunt. 'Great families, we all know, are often very queer in their arrangements. But there can be no doubt it is all right, for it is in the peerage. If it had been Frances, I should have been too happy. With such a connection, he could not fail to get on.'

'He had much better get on by his own merits,' retorted the General with a grumble. 'Frances! Frances was not to be compared with this girl. But I don't believe she means anything more than amusing herself,' he added. 'This is not the sort of girl to marry a poor soldier without a penny—not she. She will take her fun out of him, and then——'

The General kissed the end of his fingers and tossed them into the air. He was, perhaps, a little annoyed that his son had stepped in and monopolised the most amusing member of the society. And perhaps he did not think so badly of George's chances as he said.

'You may be sure,' said Mrs. Gaunt indignantly, 'she will do nothing of the kind. It is not every day that a girl gets a fine fellow like our George at her feet. He is just a little too much at her feet, which is always a mistake, I think. But still, General, you cannot but allow that Lord Markham's sister——'

'I have never seen much good come of great connections,' said the General; but though his tone was that of a sceptic, his mind was softer than his speech. He, too, felt a certain elation in the thought that the youngest, who was not the clever one of the family, and who had not been quite so steady as might have been desired, was thus in the way of putting himself above the reach of fate. For of course, to be brother-in-law to a viscount was a good thing. It might not be of the same use as in the days when patronage ruled supreme; but still it would be folly to suppose that it was not an advantage. It would admit George to circles with which otherwise he could have formed no acquaintance, and make him known to people who could push him in his profession. George was the one about whom they had been most anxious. All the others were doing well in their way, though it was not a way which threw them into contact with viscounts or fine society. George would be over all their heads in that respect, and he was the one that wanted it most,—he was the one who was most dependent on outside aid.

'I don't quite understand,' said Mrs. Gaunt, 'what Constance's position is. She ought to be the Honourable, don't you think? The Honourable Constance sounds very pretty. It would come in very nicely with Gaunt, which is an aristocratic-sounding name. People may say what they like about titles, but they are very nice, there is such individuality in them. Mrs. George might be anybody; it might be me, as your name is George too. But the Honourable would distinguish it at once. When she called here, there was only Miss Constance Waring written on her father's card; but then you don't put Honourable on your card; and as Lady Markham's daughter——'

'Women don't count,' said the General, 'as I've often told you. She's Waring's daughter.'

'Mr. Waring may be a very clever man,' said Mrs. Gaunt indignantly; 'but I should like to know how Constance can be the daughter of a viscountess in her own right without——'

'Is she a viscountess in her own right?'

This question brought Mrs. Gaunt to a sudden pause. She looked at him with a startled air. 'It is not through Mr. Waring, that is clear,' she said.

'But it is not in her own right—at least I don't think so; it is through her first husband, the father of that funny little creature' (meaning Lord Markham).

'General!' said Mrs. Gaunt, shocked. Then she added, 'I must make some excuse to look at the Peerage this afternoon. The Durants have always got their Peerage on the table. We shall have to send for one too, if——'

'If what? If your boy gets a wife who has titled connections, for that is all. A wife! and what is he to keep her on, in the name of heaven?'

'Mothers and brothers are tolerably close connections,' said Mrs. Gaunt with dignity. 'He has got his pay, General; and you always intended, if he married to your satisfaction—— Of course,' she added, speaking very quickly, to forestall an outburst, 'Lady Markham will not leave her daughter dependent upon a captain's pay. And even Mr. Waring—Mr. Waring must have a fortune of his own, or—or a person like that would never have married him; and he would not be able to live as he does, very comfortably, even luxuriously——'

'Oh, I suppose he has enough to live on. But as for pinching himself in order to enable his girl to marry your boy, I don't believe a word of it,' exclaimed the General. Fortunately, being carried away by this wave of criticism, he had forgotten his wife's allusion to his own intentions in George's favour; and this was a subject on which she had no desire to be premature.

'Well, General,' she said, 'perhaps we are going a little too fast. We don't know yet whether anything will come of it. George is rather a lady's man. It may be only a flirtation; it may end in nothing. We need not begin to count our chickens——'

'Why, it was you!' cried the astonished General. 'I never should have remarked anything about it, or wasted a moment's thought on the subject!'

Mrs. Gaunt was not a clever woman, skilled in the art of leaving conversational responsibilities on the shoulders of her interlocutor; but if a woman is not inspired on behalf of her youngest boy, when is she to be inspired? She gave her shoulders the slightest possible shrug and left him to his newspaper. They had a newspaper from England every morning—the *Standard*, whose reasonable Conservatism suited the old General. Except in military matters, such questions as the advance of Russia towards Afghanistan, or the defences of our own coasts, the General was not a bigot, and preferred his politics mild, with as little froth and foam as possible. His newspaper afforded him occupation for the entire morning, and he enjoyed it in very pleasant wise, seated under his veranda, with a faint suspicion of lemon-blossom in the air which ruffled the young olive-trees all around, and the blue breadths of the sea stretching far away at his feet. The garden behind was fenced in with lemon and orange trees, the fruit in several stages, and just a little point of blossom here and there, not enough to load the air. Mrs. Gaunt had preserved the wild flowers that were natural to the place, and accordingly had a scarlet field of anemones which wanted no cultivation, and innumerable clusters of the sweet white narcissus filling her little enclosure. These cost no trouble, and left Toni, the man-of-all-work, at leisure for the more profitable culture of the olives. From where the General sat, there was nothing visible, however, but the terraces descending in steps towards the distant glimpse of the road, and the light-blue margin, edged with spray, of the sea—under a soft and cheering sun, that warmed to the heart, but did not scorch or blaze, and with a soft air playing about his old temples, breathing freshness and that lemon-bloom. Sometimes there would come a faint sound of voices from some group of workers among the olives. The little clump of palm-trees at the end of the garden —for nothing here is perfect without a palm or two—cast a fantastic shadow, that waved over the newspaper now and then. When a man is old and has done his work, what can he want more than this sweet retirement and stillness? But naturally, it was not all that was necessary to young Captain George.

Mrs. Gaunt went over to the Durants in the afternoon, as she so often did, and found that family, as usual, on their loggia. It cost her a little trouble and diplomacy to get a private inspection of the Peerage, and even when she did so, it threw but little light upon her question. Geoffrey Viscount Markham, tenth lord, was a name which she read with a little flutter of her heart, feeling that he was already almost a relation; and she read over the names of Markham Priory and Dunmorra, his lodge in the Highlands, and the town address in Eaton Square, all with a sense that by and by she might herself be directing letters from one or other of these places. But the Peerage said nothing about the Dowager Lady Markham subsequent to the conclusion of the first marriage, except that she had married again, E. Waring, Esq.; and thus Mrs. Gaunt's studies came to no satisfactory end. She introduced the subject, however, in the course of tea. She had asked whether any one had heard from Frances, and had received a satisfactory reply.

'Oh yes; I have had two letters; but she does not say very much. They had gone down to the Priory for Easter; and she was to be presented at the first drawing-room. Fancy Frances in a Court train and feathers, at a drawing-room! It does seem so very strange,' Tasie said. She said it with a slight sigh, for it was she, in old times, who had expounded Society to little Frances, and taught her what in an emergency it would be right to do and say; and now little Frances had taken a stride in advance. 'I asked her to write and tell us all about it, and what she wore.'

'It would be white, of course.'

'Oh yes, it would be white—a *débutante*. When *I* went to drawing-rooms,' said Mrs. Durant, who had once, in the character of chaplainess to an Embassy, made her courtesy to her Majesty, 'young ladies' toilets were simpler than now. Frances will probably be in white satin, which, except for a wedding dress, is quite unsuitable, I think, for a girl.'

'I wonder if we shall see it in the papers? Sometimes my sister-in-law sends me a *Queen*,' said Mrs. Gaunt, 'when she thinks there is something in it which will interest me; but she does not know anything about Frances. Dear little thing, I can't think of her in white satin. Her sister, now——'

'Constance would wear velvet, if she could—or cloth of gold,' cried Tasie, with a little irritation. Her mother gave her a reproving glance.

'There is a tone in your voice, Tasie, which is not kind.'

'Oh yes; I know, mamma. But Constance is rather a trial. I know one ought not to show it. She looks as if one was not good enough to tie her shoes. And after all she is no better than Frances; she is not half so nice as Frances; but I mean there can be no difference of position between sisters—one is just as good as the other; and Frances was so fond of coming here.'

'Do you think Constance gives herself airs? Oh no, dear Tasie,' said Mrs. Gaunt; 'she is really not at all—when you come to know her. I am most fond of Frances myself. Frances has grown up among us, and we know all about her; that is what makes the difference. And Constance—is a little shy.'

At this there was a cry from the family. 'I don't think she is shy,' said the old clergyman, whom Constance had insulted by walking out of church before the sermon.

'Shy!' exclaimed Mrs. Durant, 'about as shy as——' But no simile occurred to her which was bold enough to meet the case.

'It is better she should not be shy,' said Tasie. 'You remember how she drove those people from the hotel to church. They have come ever since. They are quite afraid of her. Oh, there are some good things in her, some *very* good things.'

'We are the more hard to please, after knowing Frances,' repeated Mrs. Gaunt. 'But when a girl has been like that, used to the best society—— By the way, Mr. Durant, you who know everything, are sure to know—Is she the Honourable? For my part I can't quite make it out.'

Mr. Durant put on his spectacles to look at her, as if such a question passed the bounds of the permissible. He was very imposing when he looked at any one through those spectacles with an air of mingled astonishment and superiority. 'Why should she be an Honourable?' he said.

Mrs. Gaunt felt as if she would like to sink into the abysses of the earth—that is, through the floor of the loggia, whatever might be the dreadful depths underneath. 'Oh, I don't know,' she said meekly. 'I—I only thought—her mother being a—a titled person, a—a viscountess in her own right——'

'But, my *dear* lady,' said Mr. Durant, with a satisfaction in his superior knowledge which was almost unspeakable, 'Lady Markham is *not* a viscountess in her own right. Dear, no! She is not a viscountess at all. She is plain Mrs. Waring, and nothing else, if right was right. Society only winks good-naturedly at her retaining the title, which she certainly, if there is any meaning in the peerage at all, forfeits by marrying a commoner.'

Mrs. Durant and Tasie both looked with great admiration at their head and instructor as he thus spoke. 'You may be sure Mr. Durant says nothing that he is not quite sure of,' said the wife, crushing any possible scepticism on the part of the inquirer; and 'Papa knows such a lot,' added Tasie, awed, yet smiling, on her side.

'Oh, is that all?' said Mrs. Gaunt, greatly subdued. 'But then, Lord Markham—calls her his sister, you know.'

'The nobility,' said Mr. Durant, 'are always very scrupulous about relationships; and she *is* his step-sister. He couldn't qualify the relationship by calling her so. A common person might do so, but not a man of high breeding, like Lord Markham—that is all.'

'I suppose you must be right,' said Mrs. Gaunt. 'The General said so too. But it does seem very strange to me that of the same woman's children, and she a lady of title, one should be a lord, and the other have no sort of distinction at all.' They all smiled upon her blandly, every one ready with a new piece of information, and much sympathy for her ignorance, which Mrs. Gaunt, seeing that it was she that was likely to be related to Lord Markham, and not any of the Durants, felt that she could not bear; so she jumped up hastily and declared that she must be going, that the General would be waiting for her. 'I hope you will come over some evening, and I will ask the Warings, and Tasie must bring her music. I am sure you would like to hear George's violin. He is getting on so well, with Constance to play his accompaniments;' and before any one could reply to her, Mrs. Gaunt had hurried away.

It is painful not to have time to get out your retort; and these excellent people turned instinctively upon each other to discharge the unflown arrows. 'It is so very easy, with a little trouble, to understand the titles, complimentary and otherwise, of our own nobility,' said Mr. Durant, shaking his head.

'And such a sign of want of breeding not to understand them,' said his wife.

'The Honourable Constance would sound very pretty,' cried Tasie; 'it is such a pity.'

'Especially, our friend thinks, if it was the Honourable Constance Gaunt.'

'That she could never be, my dear,' said the old clergyman mildly. 'She might be the Honourable Mrs. Gaunt; but Constance, no—not in any case.'

'I should like to know why,' Mrs. Durant said.

Perhaps here the excellent chaplain's knowledge failed him, or he had become weary of the subject; for he rose and said, 'I have really no more time for a matter which does not concern us,' and trotted away.

The mother and daughter left alone together, naturally turned to a point more interesting than the claims of Constance to rank. 'Do you really think, mamma,' said Tasie—'do you really, really think—it is silly to be always discussing these sort of questions—but do you believe that Constance Waring actually—means anything?'

'You should say does George Gaunt mean anything? The girl never comes first in such a question,' said Mrs. Durant, with that ingrained contempt for girls which often appears in elderly women. Tasie was so (traditionally) young, besides having a heart of sixteen in her bosom, that her sympathies were all with the girl.

'I don't think in this case, mamma,' she said. 'Constance is so much more a person of the world than any of us. I don't mean to say she is worldly. Oh no! but having been in society, and so much *out*.'

'I should like to know in what kind of society she has been,' said Mrs. Durant, who took gloomy views. 'I don't want to say a word against Lady Markham; but Society, Tasie—the kind of society to which your father and I have been accustomed—looks rather coldly upon a wife living apart from her husband. Oh, I don't mean to say Lady Markham was to blame. Probably she is a most excellent person; but the presumption is that at least, you know, there were—faults on both sides.'

'I am sure I can't give an opinion,' cried Tasie, 'for, of course, I don't know anything about it. But George Gaunt has nothing but his pay; and Constance couldn't be in love with him, could she? Oh no! I don't know anything about it; but I can't think a girl like Constance——'

'A girl in a false position,' said the chaplain's wife, 'is often glad to marry any one, just for a settled place in the world.'

'Oh, but not Constance, mamma! I am sure she is just amusing herself.'

'Tasie! you speak as if she were the man,' exclaimed Mrs. Durant, in a tone of reproof.

## CHAPTER XX

THE subjects of these consultations were at the moment in the full course of a sonata, and oblivious of everything else in the world but themselves, their music, and their concerns generally. A fortnight had passed of continual intercourse, of much music, of that propinquity which is said to originate more matches than any higher influence. Nothing can be more curious than the pleasure which young persons, and even persons who are no longer young, find perennially in this condition of suppressed love-making, this preoccupation of all thoughts and plans in the series of continually recurring meetings, the confidences, the divinations, the endless talk which is never exhausted, and in which the most artificial beings in the world probably reveal more of themselves than they themselves know—when the edge of emotion is always being touched, and very often, by one of the pair at least overpassed, in either a comic or a tragic way. It is not necessary that there should be any real charm in either party, and, what is still more extraordinary, it is possible enough that one may be a person of genius, and the other not far removed from a fool; that one may be simple as a rustic, and the other a man or woman of the world. No rule, in short, holds in those extraordinary yet most common and everyday conjunctions. There is an amount of amusement, excitement, variety, to be found in them which is in no other kind of diversion. This is the great reason, no doubt, why flirtation never fails. It is dangerous, which helps the effect. For those sinners who go into it voluntarily for the sake of amusement, it has all the attractions of romance and the drama combined. If they are intellectual, it is a study of human character; in all cases, it is an interest which quickens the colour and the current of life: who can tell why or how? It is not the disastrous love-makings that end in misery and sin, of which we speak. It is those which are practised in society every day, which sometimes end in a heart-break indeed, but often in nothing at all.

Constance was not unacquainted with the amusement, though she was so young; and it is to be feared that she resorted to it deliberately for the amusement of her otherwise dull life at the Palazzo, in the first shock of her loneliness, when she felt herself abandoned. It was, of course, the victim himself who had first put the suggestion and the means of carrying it out into her hands. And she did not take it up in pure wantonness, but actually gave a thought to him, and the effect it might produce upon him, even in the very act of entering upon her diversion. She said to herself that Captain Gaunt, too, was very dull; that he would want something more than the society of his father and mother; that it would be a kindness to the old people to make his life amusing to him, since in that case he would stay, and in the other, not. And as for himself, if the worst came to the worst, and he fell seriously in love—as, indeed, seemed rather likely, judging from the fervour of the beginning—even that, Constance calculated, would do him no permanent harm. 'Men have died,' she said to herself, 'but not for love.' And then there is that famous phrase about a liberal education. What was it? To love her was a liberal education? Something of that sort. Then it could only be an advantage to him; for Constance was aware that she herself was cleverer, more cultivated, and generally far more 'up to' everything than young Gaunt. If he had to pay for it by a disappointment, really everybody had to pay for their education in one way or another; and if he were disappointed, it would be his own fault; for he must know very well, everybody must know, that it was quite out of the question she should marry him in any circumstances—entirely out of the question; unless he was an absolute simpleton, or the most presumptuous young coxcomb in the world, he *must* see that; and if he were one or the other, the discovery would do him all the good in the world. Thus Constance made it out fully, and to her own satisfaction, that in any case the experience could do him nothing but good.

Things had gone very far during this fortnight—so far, that she sometimes had a doubt whether they had not gone far enough. For one thing, it had cost her a great deal in the way of music. She was a very accomplished musician for her age, and poor George Gaunt was one of the greatest bunglers that ever began to study the violin. It may be supposed what an amusement this intercourse was to Constance, when it is said that she bore with his violin like an angel, laughed and scolded and encouraged and pulled him along till he believed that he could play the waltzes of Chopin and many other things which were as far above him as the empyrean is above earth. When he paused, bewildered, imploring her to go on, assuring her that he could catch her up, Constance betrayed no horror, but only laughed till the tears came. She would turn round upon her music-stool sometimes and rally him with a free use of a superior kind of slang, which was unutterably solemn, and quite unknown to the young soldier, who laboured conscientiously with his fiddle in the evenings and mornings, till General Gaunt's life became a burden to him—in a vain effort to elevate himself to a standard with which she might be satisfied. He went to practise in the morning; he went in the afternoon to ask if she thought of making any expedition? to suggest that his mother wished very much to take him to see this or that, and had sent him to ask would Miss Waring come? Constance was generally quite willing to come, and not at all afraid to walk to the bungalow with him, where, perhaps, old Luca's carriage would be standing to drive them along the dusty road to the opening of some valley, where Mrs. Gaunt, not a good climber, she allowed, would sit and wait for them till they had explored the dell, or inspected the little town seated at its head. Captain Gaunt was more punctilious about his mother's presence as *chaperon* than Constance was, who felt quite at her ease roaming with him among the terraces of the olive woods. It was altogether so idyllic, so innocent, that there was no occasion for any conventional safeguards: and there was nobody to see them or remark upon the prolonged *tête-à-tête*. Constance came to know the young fellow far better than his mother did, better than he himself did, in these walks and talks.

'Miss Waring, don't laugh at a fellow. I know I deserve it.—Oh yes, do, if you like. I had rather you laughed than closed the piano. I had a good long grind at it this morning; but somehow these triplets are more than I can fathom. Let us have that movement again, will you? Oh, not if you are tired. As long as you'll let me sit and talk. I love music with all my heart, but I love——'

'Chatter,' said Constance. 'I know you do. It is not a dignified word to apply to a gentleman; but you know, Captain Gaunt, you do love to chatter.'

'Anything to please you,' said the young man. 'That wasn't how I intended to end my sentence. I love to—chatter, if you like, as long as you will listen—or play, or do anything; as long as——'

'You must allow,' said Constance, 'that I listen admirably. I am thoroughly well up in all your subjects. I know the station as well as if I lived there.'

'Don't say that,' he cried; 'it makes a man beside himself. Oh, if there was any chance that you might ever——! I think—I'm almost sure—you would like the society in India—it's so easy; everybody's so kind. A—a young couple, you know, as long as the lady is—delightful.'

'But I am not a young couple,' said Constance, with a smile. 'You sometimes confuse your plurals in the funniest way. Is that Indian too? Now come, Captain Gaunt, let us get on. Begin at the andante. One, two—three! Now, let's get on.'

And then a few bars would be played, and then she would turn sharp round upon the music-stool and take the violin out of his astonished hands.

'Oh, what a shriek! It goes through and through one's head. Don't you think an instrument has feelings? That was a cry of the poor ill-used fiddle, that could bear no more. Give it to me.' She took the bow in her hands, and leaned the instrument tenderly against her shoulder. 'It should be played like this,' she said.

'Miss Waring, you can play the violin too?'

'A little,' she said, leaning down her soft cheek against it, as if she loved it, and drawing a charmingly sympathetic harmony from the ill-used strings.

'I will never play again,' cried the young man. 'Yes, I will—to touch it where you have touched it. Oh, I think you can do everything, and make everything perfect you look at.'

'No,' said Constance, shaking her head as she ran the bow softly, so softly over the strings; 'for you are not perfect at all, though I have looked at you a great deal. Look! this is the way to do it. I am not going to accompany you any more. I am going to give you lessons. Take it now, and let me see you play that passage. Louder, softer—louder. Come, that was better. I think I shall make something of you after all.'

'You can make anything of me,' said the poor young soldier, with his lips on the place her cheek had touched—'whatever you please.'

'A first-rate violin-player, then,' said Constance. 'But I don't think my power goes so high as that. Poor General, what does he say when you grind, as you call it, all the morning?'

'Oh, mother smooths him down—that is the use of a mother.'

'Is it?' said Constance, with an air of impartial inquiry. 'I didn't know. Come, Captain Gaunt, we are losing our time.'

And then *tant bien que mal*, the sonata was got through.

'I am glad Beethoven is dead,' said Constance, as she closed the piano. 'He is safe from that at least: he can never hear us play. When you go home, Captain Gaunt, I advise you to take lodgings in some quite out-of-the-way place, about Russell Square, or Islington, or somewhere, and grind, as you call it, till you are had up as a nuisance; or else——'

'Or else—what, Miss Waring? Anything to please you.'

'Or else—give it up altogether,' Constance said.

His face grew very long; he was very fond of his violin. 'If you think it is so hopeless as that—if you wish me to give it up altogether——'

'Oh, not I. It amuses me. I like to hear you break down. It would be quite a pity if you were to give up, you take my scolding so delightfully. Don't give it up as long as you are here, Captain Gaunt. After that, it doesn't matter what happens—to me.'

'No,' he said, almost with a groan, 'it doesn't matter what happens after that—to me. It's the Deluge, you know,' said the poor young fellow. 'I wish the world would come to an end first'—thus unconsciously echoing the poet. 'But, Miss Waring,' he added anxiously, coming a little closer, 'I may come back? Though I must go to London, it is not necessary I should stay there. I may come back?'

'Oh, I hope so, Captain Gaunt. What would your mother do, if you did not come back? But I suppose she will be going away for the summer. Everybody leaves Bordighera in the summer, I hear.'

'I had not thought of that,' cried the young soldier. 'And you will be going too?'

'I suppose so,' said Constance. 'Papa, I hope, is not so lost to every sense of duty as to let me spoil my complexion for ever by staying here.'

'That would be impossible,' he said, with eyes full of admiration.

'You intend that for a compliment, Captain Gaunt; but it is no compliment. It means either that I have no complexion to lose, or that I am one of those thick-skinned people who take no harm—neither of which is complimentary nor true. I shall have to teach you how to pay compliments as well as how to play the violin.'

'Ah, if you only would!' he cried. 'Teach me how to make myself what you like—how to speak, how to look, how——'

'Oh, that is a great deal too much,' she said. 'I cannot undertake all your education. Do you know it is close upon noon? Unless you are going to stay to breakfast——'

'Oh, thanks, Miss Waring. They will expect me at home. But you will give me a message to take back to my mother. I may come to fetch you to drive with her to-day?'

'It must be dreadfully dull work for her sitting waiting while we explore.'

'Oh, not at all. She is never dull when she knows I am enjoying myself—that's the mother's way.'

'Is it?' said Constance, with once more that air of acquiring information. 'I am not acquainted with that kind of mother. But do you think, Captain Gaunt, it is right to enjoy yourself, as you call it, at your mother's cost?'

He gave her a look of great doubt and trouble. 'Oh, Miss Waring, I don't think you should put it so. My mother finds her pleasure in that—indeed she does. Ask herself. Of course I would not impose upon her, not for the world; but she likes it, I assure you she likes it.'

'It is very extraordinary that any one should like sitting in that carriage for hours with nothing to do. I will come with pleasure, Captain Gaunt. I will sit with your mother while you go and take your walk. That will be more cheerful for all parties,' Constance said.

Young Gaunt's face grew half a mile long. He began to expostulate and explain; but Waring's step was heard stirring in the next room, approaching the door, and the young man had no desire to see the master of the house with his watch in his hand, demanding to know why Domenico was so late. Captain Gaunt knew very well why Domenico was so late. He knew a way of conciliating the servants, though he had not yet succeeded with the young mistress. He said hurriedly, 'I will come for you at three,' and rushed away. Waring came in at one door as Gaunt disappeared at the other. The delay of the breakfast was a practical matter, of which, without any reproach of medievalism, he had a right to complain.

'If you must have this young fellow every morning, he may at least go away in proper time,' he said, with his watch in his hand, as young Gaunt had divined.

'Oh, papa, twelve is striking loud enough. You need not produce your watch at the same time.'

'Then why have I to wait?' he said. There was something awful in his tone. But Domenico was equal to the occasion, worthy at once of the lover's and of the father's trust. At that moment, Captain Gaunt having been got away while the great bell of Bordighera was still sounding, the faithful Domenico threw open, perhaps with a little more sound than was necessary, an ostentation of readiness, the dining-room door.

The meal was a somewhat silent one. Perhaps Constance was pondering the looks which she had not been able to ignore, the words which she had managed to quench like so many fiery arrows before they could set fire to anything, of her eager lover, and was pale and a little preoccupied in spite of herself, feeling that things were going further than she intended; and perhaps her father, feeling the situation too serious, and remonstrance inevitable, was silenced by the thought of what he had to say. It is so difficult in such circumstances for two people, with no relief from any third party, without even that wholesome regard for the servant in attendance, which keeps the peace during many a family crisis—for with Domenico, who knew no English, they were as safe as when they were alone—it is very difficult to find subjects for conversation, that will not lead direct to the very heart of the matter which is being postponed. Constance could not talk of her music, for Gaunt was associated with it. She could not speak of her walk, for he was her invariable companion. She could ask no questions about the neighbourhood, for was it not to make her acquainted with the neighbourhood that all those expeditions were being made? The great bouquet of anemones which blazed in the centre of the table came from Mrs. Gaunt's garden. She began to think that she was buying her amusement too dearly. As for Waring, his mind was not so full of these references, but he was occupied by the thought of what he had to say to this headstrong girl, and by a strong sense that he was an ill-used man, in having such responsibilities thrust upon him against his will. Frances would not have led him into such difficulties. To Frances, young Gaunt would have been no more interesting than his father; or so at least this man, whose experience had taught him so little, was ready to believe.

'I want to say something to you, Constance,' he began at length, after Domenico had left the room. 'You must not stop my mouth by remarks about middle-age parents. I am a middle-age parent, so there is an end of it. Are you going to marry George Gaunt?'

'I—going to marry George Gaunt! Papa!'

'You had better, I think,' said her father. 'It will save us all a great deal of embarrassment. I should not have recommended it, had I been consulted at the beginning. But you like to be independent and have your own way; and the best thing you can do is to marry. I don't know how your mother will take it; but so far as I am concerned, I think it would save everybody a great deal of trouble. You will be able to turn him round your finger; that will suit you, though the want of money may be in your way.'

'I think you must mean to insult me, papa,' said Constance, who had grown crimson.

'That is all nonsense, my dear. I am suggesting what seems the best thing in the circumstances, to set us all at our ease.'

'To get rid of me, you mean,' she cried.

'I have not taken any steps to get rid of you. I did not invite you, in the first place, you will remember; you came of your own will. But I was very willing to make the best of it. I let Frances go, who suited me—whom I had brought up—for your sake. All the rest has been your doing. Young Gaunt was never invited by me. I have had no hand in those rambles of yours. But since you find so much pleasure in his society——'

'Papa, you know I don't find pleasure in his society; you know——'

'Then why do you seek it?' said Waring, with that logic which is so cruel.

Constance, on the other side of the table, was as red as the anemones, and far more brilliant in the glow of passion. 'I have not sought it,' she cried. 'I have let him come—that is all. I have gone when Mrs. Gaunt asked me. Must a girl marry every man that chooses to be silly? Can I help it, if he is so vain? It is only vanity,' she said, springing up from her chair, 'that makes men think a girl is always ready to marry. What should I marry for? If I had wanted to marry —— Papa, I don't wish to be disagreeable, but it is *vulgar*, if you force me to say it—it is common to talk to me so.'

'I might retort,' said Waring.

'Oh yes, I know you might retort. It is common to amuse one's self. So is it common to breathe and move about, and like a little fun when you are young. I have no fun here. There is nobody to talk to, not a thing to do. How do you suppose I am to get on? How can I live without something to fill up my time?'

'Then you must take the consequences,' he said.

In spite of herself, Constance felt a shiver of alarm. She began to speak, then stopped suddenly, looked at him with a look of mingled defiance and terror, and—what was so unlike her, so common, so weak, as she felt—began to cry, notwithstanding all she could do to restrain herself. To hide this unaccountable weakness, she hastened off and hid herself in her room, making as if she had gone off in resentment. Better that, than that he should see her crying like any silly girl. All this had got on her nerves, she explained to herself afterwards. The consequences! Constance held her breath as they became dimly apparent to her in an atmosphere of horror. George Gaunt no longer an eager lover, whom it was amusing, even exciting to draw on, to see just on the eve of a self-committal, which it was the greatest fun in the world to stop, before it went too far—but the master of her destinies, her constant and inseparable companion, from whom she could never get free, by whom she must not even say that she was bored to death—gracious powers! and with so many other attendant horrors. To go to India with him, to fall into the life of the station, to march with the regiment. Constance's lively imagination pictured a baggage-waggon with herself on the top, which made her laugh. But the reality was not laughable; it was horrible. The consequences! No; she would not take the consequences. She would sit with Mrs. Gaunt in the carriage, and let him take his walk by himself. She would begin to show him the extent of his mistake from that very day. To take any stronger step, to refuse to go out with him at all, she thought, on consideration, not necessary. The gentler measures first, which perhaps he might be wise enough to accept.

But if he did not accept them, what was Constance to do? She had run away from an impending catastrophe, to take refuge with her father. But with whom could she take refuge, if he continued to hold his present strain of argument? And unless he would go away of himself, how was she to shake off this young soldier? She did not want to shake him off; he was all the amusement she had. What was she to do?

There glanced across her mind for a moment a sort of desperate gleam of reflection from her father's words: 'You like to be independent; the best thing you can do is to marry.' There was a kind of truth in it, a sort of distorted truth, such as was likely enough to come through the medium of a mind so wholly at variance with all established forms. Independent—there was something in that; and India was full of novelty, amusing, a sort of world she had no experience of. A tremor of excitement got into her nerves as she heard the bell ring, and knew that he had come for her. He! the only individual who was at all interesting for the moment, whom she held in her hands, to do what she pleased with. She could turn him round her little finger, as her father said: and independence! Was it a Mephistopheles that was tempting her, or a good angel leading her the right way?

## CHAPTER XXI

FRANCES remembered little of the journey after it was over, though she was keenly conscious of everything at the time, if there can be any keen consciousness of a thing which is all vague, which conveys no clear idea. Through the darkness of the night, which came on before she had left the coast she knew, with all those familiar towns gleaming out as she passed—Mentone, Monaco on its headland, the sheltering bays which keep so warm and bright those cities of sickness, of idleness, and pleasure—the palms, the olives, the oranges, the aloe hedges, the roses and heliotropes—there was a confused and breathless sweep of distance, half in the dark, half in the light, the monotonous plains, the lines of poplars, the straight highroads of France. Paris, where they stayed for a night, was only like a bigger, noisier, vast railway station, to Frances. She had no time, in the hurry of her journey, in the still greater hurry of her thoughts, to realise that here was the scene of that dread Revolution of which she had read with shuddering excitement—that she was driven past the spot where the guillotine was first set up, and through the streets where the tumbrels had rolled, carrying to that dread death the many tender victims, who were all she knew of that great convulsion of history. Markham, who was so good to her, put his head out of the carriage and pointed to a series of great windows flashing with light. 'What a pity there's no time!' he said. She asked, 'For what?' with the most complete want of comprehension. 'For shopping, of course,' he said, with a laugh. For shopping! She seemed to be unacquainted with the meaning of the words. In the midst of this strange wave of the unknown which was carrying her away, carrying her to a world more unknown still, to suppose that she could pause and think of shopping! The inappropriateness of the suggestion bewildered Frances. Markham, indeed, altogether bewildered her. He was very good to her, attending to her comfort, watchful over her needs in a way which she could not have imagined possible. Her father had never been unkind; but it did not occur to him to take care of her. It was she who took care of him. If there was anything forgotten, it was she who got the blame; and when he wanted a book, or his writing-desk, or a rug to put over his knees, he called to his little girl to hand it to him, without the faintest conception that there was anything incongruous in it. And there was nothing incongruous in it. If there is any one in the world whom it is natural to send on your errands, to get you what you want, surely your child is that person. Waring did not think on the subject, but simply did so by instinct, by nature; and equally by instinct Frances obeyed, without a doubt that it was her simplest duty. If Markham had said, 'Get me my book, Frances; dear child, just open that bag—hand me so-and-so,' she would have considered it the most natural thing in the world. What he did do surprised her much more. He tripped in and out of his seat at her smallest suggestion. He pulled up and down the window at her pleasure, never appearing to think that it mattered whether *he* liked it or not. He took her out carefully on his arm, and made her dine, not asking what she would have, as her father might perhaps have done, but bringing her the best that was to be had, choosing what she should eat, serving her as if she had been the Queen! It contributed to the dizzying effect of the rapid journey that she should thus have been placed in a position so different from any that she had ever known.

And then there came the last stage, the strange leaden-gray stormy sea, which was so unlike those blue ripples that came up just so far—no farther, on the beach at Bordighera. She began to understand what is said in the Bible about the waves that mount up like mountains, when she saw the roll of the Channel. She had always a little wondered what that meant. To be sure, there were storms now and then along the Riviera, when the blue edge to the sea-mantle disappeared, and all became a deep purple, solemn enough for a king's pall, as it has been the pall of so many a brave man; but even that was never like the dangerous threatening lash of the waves along those rocks, and the way in which they raised their awful heads. And was that England, white with a faint line of green, so sodden and damp as it looked, rising out of the sea? The heart of Frances sank: it was not like her anticipations. She had thought there would be something triumphant, grand, about the aspect of England—something proud, like a monarch of the sea; and it was only a damp, grayish-white line, rising not very far out of those sullen waves. An east wind was blowing with that blighting grayness which here, in the uttermost parts of the earth, we are so well used to: and it was cold. A gleam of pale sun indeed shot out of the clouds from time to time; but there was no real warmth in it, and the effect of everything was depressing. The green fields and hedgerows cheered her a little; but it was all damp, and the sky was gray. And then came London, with a roar and noise as if they had fallen into a den of wild beasts, and throngs, multitudes of people at every little station which the quick train flashed past, and on the platform, where at last she arrived dizzy and faint with fatigue and wonderment. But Markham always was more kind than words could say. He sympathised with her, seeing her forlorn looks at everything. He did not ask her how she liked it, what she thought of her native country. When they arrived at last, he found out miraculously, among the crowd of carriages, a quiet, little, dark-coloured brougham, and put her into it. 'We'll trundle off home,' he said, 'you and I, Fan, and let John look after the things; you are so tired you can scarcely speak.'

'Not so much tired,' said Frances, and tried to smile, but could not say any more.

'I understand.' He took her hand into his with the kindest caressing touch. 'You mustn't be frightened, my dear. There's nothing to be frightened about. You'll like my mother. Perhaps it was silly of me to say that, and make you cry. Don't cry, Fan, or I shall cry too. I am the foolishest little beggar, you know, and always do what my companions do. Don't make a fool of your old brother, my dear. There, look out and see what a beastly place old London is, Fan.'

'Don't call me Fan,' she cried, this slight irritation affording her an excuse for disburdening herself of some of the nervous excitement in her. 'Call me Frances, Markham.'

'Life's too short for a name in two syllables. I've got two syllables myself, that's true; but many fellows call me Mark, and you are welcome to, if you like. No; I shall call you Fan; you must make up your mind to it. Did you ever see such murky heavy air? It isn't air at all—it's smoke, and animalculæ, and everything that's dreadful. It's not like that blue stuff on the Riviera, is it?'

'Oh no!' cried Frances, with fervour. 'But I suppose London is better for some things,' she added with a doubtful voice.

'Better! It's better than any other place on the face of the earth; it's the only place to live in,' said Markham. 'Why, child, it is paradise,'—he paused a moment, and then added, 'with pandemonium next door.'

'Markham!' the girl cried.

'I was wrong to mention such a place in your hearing. I know I was. Never mind, Fan; you shall see the one, and you shall know nothing about the other. Why, here we are in Eaton Square.'

The door flashed open as soon as the carriage stopped, letting out a flood of light and warmth. Markham almost lifted the trembling girl out. She had got her veil entangled about her head, her arms in the cloak which she had half thrown off. She was not prepared for this abrupt arrival. She seemed to see nothing but the light, to know nothing until she found herself suddenly in some one's arms; then the light seemed to go out of her eyes. Sight had nothing to do with the sensation, the warmth, the softness, the faint rustle, the faint perfume, with which she was suddenly encircled; and for a few moments she knew nothing more.

'Dear, dear, Markham, I hope she is not delicate—I hope she is not given to fainting,' she heard, in a disturbed but pleasant voice, before she felt able to open her eyes.

'Not a bit,' said Markham's familiar tones. 'She's overdone, and awfully anxious about meeting you.'

'My poor dear! Why should she be anxious about meeting me?' said the other voice, a voice round and soft, with a plaintive tone in it; and then there came the touch of a pair of lips, soft and caressing like the voice, upon the girl's cheek. She did not yet open her eyes, half because she could not, half because she would not, but whispered in a faint little tentative utterance, 'Mother!' wondering vaguely whether the atmosphere round her, the kiss, the voice, was all the mother she was to know.

'My poor little baby, my little girl! open your eyes. Markham, I want to see the colour of her eyes.'

'As if I could open her eyes for you!' cried Markham with a strange outburst of sound, which, if he had been a woman, might have meant crying, but must have been some sort of a laugh, since he was a man. He seemed to walk away, and then came back again. 'Come, Fan, that's enough. Open your eyes, and look at us. I told you there was nothing to be frightened for.'

And then Frances raised herself; for, to her astonishment, she was lying down upon a sofa, and looked round her, bewildered. Beside her stood a little lady, about her own height, with smooth brown hair like hers, with her hands clasped, just as Frances was aware she had herself a custom of clasping her hands. It began to dawn upon her that Constance had said she was very like mamma. This new-comer was beautifully dressed in soft black satin, that did not rustle—that was far, far too harsh a word—but swept softly about her with the faintest pleasant sound; and round her breathed that atmosphere which Frances felt would mean mother to her for ever and ever,—an air that was infinitely soft, with a touch in it of some sweetness. Oh, not scent! She rejected the word with disdain—something, nothing, the atmosphere of a mother. In the curious ecstasy in which she was, made up of fatigue, wonder, and the excitement of this astounding plunge into the unknown, that was how she felt.

'Let me look at you, my child. I can't think of her as a grown girl, Markham. Don't you know she is my baby. She has never grown up, like the rest of you, to me. Oh, did you never wish for me, little Frances? Did you never want your mother, my darling? Often, often, I have lain awake in the night and cried for you.'

'Oh, mamma!' cried Frances, forgetting her shyness, throwing herself into her mother's arms. The temptation to tell her that she had never known anything about her mother, to excuse herself at her father's expense, was strong. But she kept back the words that were at her lips. 'I have always wanted this all my life,' she cried, with a sudden impulse, and laid her head upon her mother's breast, feeling in all the commotion and melting of her heart a consciousness of the accessories, the rich softness of the satin, the delicate perfume, all the details of the new personality by which her own was surrounded on every side.

'Now I see,' cried the new-found mother, 'it was no use parting this child and me, Markham. It is all the same between us—isn't it, my darling?—as if we had always been together—all the same in a moment. Come upstairs now, if you feel able, dear one. Do you think, Markham, she is able to walk upstairs?'

'Oh, quite able; oh, quite, quite well. It was only for a moment. I was—frightened, I think.'

'But you will never be frightened any more,' said Lady Markham, drawing the girl's arm through her own, leading her away. Frances was giddy still, and stumbled as she went, though she had pledged herself never to be frightened again. She went in a dream up the softly-carpeted stairs. She knew what handsome rooms were, the lofty, bare grandeur of an Italian palazzo; but all this carpeting and cushioning, the softness, the warmth, the clothed and comfortable look, bewildered her. She could scarcely find her way through the drawing-room, crowded with costly furniture, to the blazing fire, by the side of which stood the tea-table, like, and yet how unlike, that anxious copy of English ways which Frances had set up in the loggia. She was conscious, with a momentary gleam of complacency, that her cups and saucers were better, though! not belonging to an ordinary modern set, like these; but, alas, in everything else how far short! Then she was taken upstairs, through—as she thought—the sumptuous arrangements of her mother's room to another smaller, which opened from it, and in which there was the same wealth of carpets, curtains, easy-chairs, and writing-tables, in addition to the necessary details of a sleeping-room. Frances looked round it admiringly. She knew nothing about the modern-artistic, though something, a very little, about old art. The painted ceilings and old gilding of the Palazzo—which she began secretly and obstinately to call *home* from this moment forth—were intelligible to her; but she was quite unacquainted with Mr. Morris's papers and the art fabrics from Liberty's. She looked at them with admiration, but doubt. She thought the walls 'killed' the pictures that were hung round, which were not like her own little gallery at home, which she had left with a little pang to her sister. 'Is this Constance's room?' she asked timidly, called back to a recollection of Constance, and wondering whether the transfer was to be complete.

'No, my love; it is Frances' room,' said Lady Markham. 'It has always been ready for you. I expected you to come some time. I have always hoped that; but I never thought that Con would desert me.' Her voice faltered a little, which instantly touched Frances' heart.

'I asked,' she said, 'not just out of curiosity, but because, when she came to us, I gave her my room. Our rooms are not like these; they have very few things in them. There are no carpets; it is warmer there, you know; but I thought she would find the blue room so bare, I gave her mine.'

Lady Markham smiled upon her, and said, but with a faint, the very faintest indication of being less interested than Frances was, 'You have not many visitors, I suppose?'

'Oh, none!' cried Frances. 'I suppose we are—rather poor. We are not—like this.'

'My darling, you don't know how to speak to me, your own mother! What do you mean, dear, by *we?* You must learn to mean something else by *we.* Your father, if he had chosen, might have had—all that you see, and more. And Constance—— But we will say nothing more to-night on that subject. This is Con's room, see, on the other side of mine. It was always my fancy, my hope, some time to have my two girls, one on each side.'

Frances followed her mother to the room on the other side with great interest. It was still more luxurious than the one appropriated to herself—more comfortable, as a room which has been occupied, which shows traces of its tenant's tastes and likings, must naturally be; and it was brighter, occupying the front of the house, while that of Frances looked to the side. She glanced round at all the fittings and decorations, which, to her unaccustomed eyes, were so splendid. 'Poor Constance!' she said under her breath.

'Why do you say poor Constance?' said Lady Markham, with something sharp and sudden in her tone. And then she, too, said regretfully, 'Poor Con! You think it will be disappointing to her, this other life which she has chosen. Was it—dreary for you, my poor child?'

Then there rose up in the tranquil mind of Frances a kind of tempest-blast of opposition and resentment. 'It is the only life I know—it was—everything I liked best,' she cried. The first part of the sentence was very firmly, almost aggressively said. In the second she wavered, hesitated, changed the tense—it *was*. She did not quite know herself what the change meant.

Lady Markham looked at her with a penetrating gaze. 'It was—everything you knew, my little Frances. I understand you, my dear. You will not be disloyal to the past. But to Constance, who does not know it, who knows something else—— Poor Con! I understand. But she will have to pay for her experience, like all the rest.'

Frances had been profoundly agitated, but in the way of happiness. She did not feel happy now. She felt disposed to cry, not because of the relief of tears, but because she did not know how else to express the sense of contrariety, of disturbance, that had got into her mind. Was it that already a wrong note had sounded between herself and this unknown mother, whom it had been a rapture to see and touch? Or was it only that she was tired? Lady Markham saw the condition into which her nerves and temper were strained. She took her back tenderly into her room. 'My dear,' she said, 'if you would rather not, don't change your dress. Do just as you please to-night. I would stay and help you, or I would send Josephine, my maid, to help you; but I think you will prefer to be left alone and quiet.'

'Oh yes,' cried Frances with fervour; then she added hastily, 'If you do not think me disagreeable to say so.'

'I am not prepared to think anything in you disagreeable, my dear,' said her mother, kissing her—but with a sigh. This sigh Frances echoed in a burst of tears when the door closed and she found herself alone—alone, quite alone, more so than she had ever been in her life, she whispered to herself, in the shock of the unreasonable and altogether fantastic disappointment which had followed her ecstasy of pleasure. Most likely it meant nothing at all but the reaction from that too highly raised level of feeling.

'No; I am not disappointed,' Lady Markham was saying downstairs. She was standing before the genial blaze of the fire, looking into it with her head bent and a serious expression on her face. 'Perhaps I was too much delighted for a moment; but she, poor child, now that she has looked at me a second time, she is a little, just a little disappointed in me That's rather hard for a mother, you know; or I suppose you don't know.'

'I never was a mother,' said Markham. 'I should think it's very natural. The little thing has been forming the most romantic ideas. If you had been an angel from heaven——'

'Which I am not,' she said with a smile, still looking into the fire.

'Heaven be praised,' said Markham. 'In that case, you would not have suited me—which you do, mammy, you know, down to the ground.'

She gave a half glance at him, a half smile, but did not disturb the chain of her reflections. 'That's something, Markham,' she said.

'Yes; it's something. On my side, it is a great deal. Don't go too fast with little Fan. She has a deal in her. Have a little patience, and let her settle down her own way.'

'I don't feel sure that she has not got her father's temper; I saw something like it in her eyes.'

'That is nonsense, begging your pardon. She has got nothing of her father in her eyes. Her eyes are like yours, and so is everything about her. My dear mother, Con's like Waring, if you like. This one is of our side of the house.'

'Do you really think so?' Lady Markham looked up now and laid her hand affectionately upon his shoulder, and laughed. 'But, my dear boy, you are as like the Markhams as you can look. On my side of the house, there is nobody at all, unless, as you say——'

'Frances,' said the little man. 'I told you—the best of the lot. I took to her in a moment by that very token. Therefore, don't go too fast with her, mother. She has her own notions. She is as staunch as a little—Turk,' said Markham, using the first word that offered. When he met his mother's eye, he retired a little, with the air of a man who does not mean to be questioned; which naturally stimulated curiosity in her mind.

'How have you found out that she is staunch, Markham?'

'Oh, in half a dozen ways,' he answered, carelessly. 'And she will stick to her father through thick and thin, so mind what you say.'

Then Lady Markham began to bemoan herself a little gently, before the fire, in the most luxurious of easy-chairs.

'Was ever woman in such a position,' she said, 'to be making acquaintance, for the first time, at eighteen, with my own daughter—and to have to pick my words and to be careful what I say?'

'Well, mammy,' said Markham, 'it might have been worse. Let us make the best of it. He has always kept his word, which is something, and has never annoyed you. And it is quite a nice thing for Con to have him to go to, to find out how dull it is, and know her own mind. And now we've got the other one too.'

Lady Markham still rocked herself a little in her chair, and put her handkerchief to her eyes. 'For all that, it is very hard, both on her and me,' she said.

## CHAPTER XXII

Lady Markham's story was one which was very well known to Society—to which everything is known—though it had remained so long a secret, and was still a mystery to one of her children. Waring had been able to lose himself in distance, and keep his position concealed from every one; but it was clear that his wife could not do so, remaining as she did in the world which was fully acquainted with her, and which required an explanation of everything that happened. Perhaps it is more essential to a woman than to a man that her position should be fully explained, though it is one of the drawbacks of an established place and sphere, which is seldom spoken of, yet is very real, and one of the greatest embarrassments of life.

So long as existence is without complications, this matters little; but when these arise, those difficulties which so often distract the career of a family, the inevitable explanations that have to be made to the little interested ring of spectators, is often the worst part of domestic trouble. Waring, whose temperament was what is called sensitive—that is, impatient, self-willed, and unenduring—would not submit to such a necessity. But a woman cannot fly; she must stand in her place, if she has any regard for that place, and for the reputation which it is common to say is more delicate and easily injured than is that of a man—and make her excuse to the world. Perhaps, as, sooner or later, excuses and explanations must be afforded, it is the wiser plan to get over them publicly and at once; for even Waring, as has been seen, though he escaped, and had a dozen years of tranquillity, had at the last to submit himself to the questions of Mr. Durant. All that was over for these dozen years with Lady Markham. Everybody knew exactly what her position was. Scandal had never breathed upon her, either at the moment of the separation or afterwards. It had been a foolish, romantic love-marriage between a woman of Society and a man who was half rustic, half scholar. They had found after a time that they could not endure each other—as anybody with a head on his shoulders could have told them from the beginning, Society said. And then he had taken the really sensible though wild and romantic step of banishing himself and leaving her free. There were some who had supposed this a piece of *bizarre* generosity, peculiar to the man, and some who thought it only a natural return to the kind of life that suited him best.

Lady Markham had, of course, been censured for this, her second marriage; and equally, of course, was censured for the breach of it—for the separation, which, indeed, was none of her doing; for retaining her own place when her husband left her; and, in short, for every step she had taken in the matter from first to last. But that was twelve years ago, which is a long time in all circumstances, and which counts for about a century in Society: and nobody thought of blaming her any longer, or of remarking at all upon the matter. The present lords and ladies of fashionable life had always known her as she was, and there was no further question about her history. When, in the previous season, Miss Waring had made her *début* in Society, and achieved the success which had been so remarkable, there was indeed a little languid question as to who was her father among those who remembered that Waring was not the name of the Markham family; but this was not interesting enough to cause any excitement. And Frances, still thrilling with the discovery of the other life, of which she had never suspected the existence, and ignorant even now of everything except the mere fact of it, suddenly found herself embraced and swallowed up in a perfectly understood and arranged routine in which there was no mystery at all.

'The first thing you must do is to make acquaintance with your relations,' said Lady Markham next morning at breakfast. 'Fortunately, we have this quiet time before Easter to get over all these preliminaries. Your aunt Clarendon will expect to see you at once.'

Frances was greatly disturbed by this new discovery. She gave a covert glance at Markham, who, though it was not his habit to appear so early, had actually produced himself at breakfast to see how the little one was getting on. Markham looked back again, elevating his eyebrows, and not understanding at first what the question meant.

'And there are all the cousins,' said the mother, with that plaintive tone in her voice. 'My dear, I hope you are not in the way of forming friendships, for there are so many of them! I think the best thing will be to get over all these duty introductions at once. I must ask the Clarendons—don't you think, Markham?—to dinner, and perhaps the Peytons,—quite a family party.'

'Certainly, by all means,' said Markham; 'but first of all, don't you think she wants to be dressed?'

Lady Markham looked at Frances critically from her smooth little head to her neat little shoes. The girl was standing by the fire, with her head reclined against the mantelpiece of carved oak, which, as a 'reproduction,' was very much thought of in Eaton Square. Frances felt that the blush with which she met her mother's look must be seen, though she turned her head away, through the criticised clothes.

'Her dress is very simple; but there is nothing in bad taste. Don't you think I might take her anywhere as she is? I did not notice her hat,' said Lady Markham, with gravity;

'but if that is right—— Simplicity is quite the right thing at eighteen——'

'And in Lent,' said Markham.

'It is quite true; in Lent, it is better than the right thing—it is the best thing. My dear, you must have had a very good maid. Foreign women have certainly better taste than the class we get our servants from. What a pity you did not bring her with you! One can always find room for a clever maid.'

'I don't believe she had any maid; it is all out of her own little head,' said Markham. 'I told you not to let yourself be taken in. She has a deal in her, that little thing.'

Lady Markham smiled, and gave Frances a kiss, enfolding her once more in that soft atmosphere which had been such a revelation to her last night. 'I am sure she is a dear little girl, and is going to be a great comfort to me. You will want to write your letters this morning, my love, which you must do before lunch. And after lunch, we will go and see your aunt. You know that is a matter of—what shall we call it, Markham?—conscience: with me.'

'Pride,' Markham said, coming and standing by them in front of the fire.

'Perhaps a little,' she answered with a smile; 'but conscience too. I would not have her say that I had kept the child from her for a single day.'

'That is how conscience speaks, Fan,' said Markham. 'You will know next time you hear it. And after the Clarendons?'

'Well—of course, there must be a hundred things the child wants. We must look at your evening dresses together, darling. Tell Josephine to lay them out and let me see them. We are going to have some people at the Priory for Easter; and when we come back, there will be no time. Yes, I think on our way home from Portland Place we must just look into—a shop or two.'

'Now my mind is relieved,' Markham said. 'I thought you were going to change the course of nature, Fan.'

'The child is quite bewildered by your nonsense, Markham,' the mother said.

And this was quite true. Frances had never been on such terms with her father as would have entitled her to venture to laugh at him. She was confused with this new phase, as well as with her many other discoveries: and it appeared to her that Markham looked just as old as his mother. Lady Markham was fresh and fair, her complexion as clear as a girl's, and her hair still brown and glossy. If art in any way added to this perfection, Frances had no suspicion of such a possibility. And when she looked from her mother's round and soft contour to the wrinkles of Markham, and his no-colour and indefinite age, and heard him address her with that half-caressing, half-bantering equality, the girl's mind grew more and more hopelessly confused. She withdrew, as was expected of her, to write her letters, though without knowing how to fulfil that duty. She could write (of course) to her father. It was of course, and so was what she told him. 'We arrived about six o'clock. I was dreadfully confused with the noise and the crowds of people. Mamma was very kind. She bids me send you her love. The house is very fine, and full of furniture, and fires in all the rooms; but one wants that, for it is much colder here. We are going out after luncheon to call on my aunt Clarendon. I wish very much I knew who she was, or who my other relations are; but I suppose I shall find out in time.' This was the scope of Frances' letter. And she did not feel warranted, somehow, in writing to Constance. She knew so little of Constance: and was she not in some respects a supplanter, taking Constance's place? When she had finished her short letter to her father, which was all fact, with very few reflections, Frances paused and looked round her, and felt no further inspiration. Should she write to Mariuccia? But that would require time—there was so much to be said to Mariuccia. Facts were not what *she* would want—at least, the facts would have to be of a different kind; and Frances felt that daylight and all the arrangements of the new life, the necessity to be ready for luncheon and to go out after, were not conditions under which she could begin to pour out her heart to her old nurse, the attendant of her childhood. She must put off till the evening, when she should be alone and undisturbed, with time and leisure to collect all her thoughts and first impressions. She put down her pen, which was not, indeed, an instrument she was much accustomed to wield, and began to think instead; but all her thinking would not tell her who the relatives were to whom she was about to be presented; and she reflected with horror that her ignorance must betray the secret which she had so carefully kept, and expose her father to further and further criticism.

There was only one way of avoiding this danger, and that was through Markham, who alone could help her, who was the only individual in whom she could feel a confidence that he would give her what information he could, and understand why she asked. If she could but find Markham! She went downstairs, timidly flitting along the wide staircase through the great drawing-room, which was vacant, and found no trace of him. She lingered, peeping out from between the curtains of the windows upon the leafless gardens outside in the spring sunshine, the passing carriages which she could see through their bare boughs, the broad pavement close at hand with so few passengers, the clatter now and then of a hansom, which amused her even in the midst of her perplexity, or the drawing up of a brougham at some neighbouring door. After a minute's distraction thus, she returned again to make further investigations from the drawing-room door, and peep over the balusters to watch for her brother. At last she had the good luck to perceive him coming out of one of the rooms on the lower floor. She darted down as swift as a bird, and touched him on the sleeve. He had his hat in his hand, as if preparing to go out. 'Oh,' she said in a breathless whisper, 'I want to speak to you; I want to ask you something,'—holding up her hand with a warning hush.

'What is it?' returned Markham, chiefly with his eyebrows, with a comic affectation of silence and secrecy which tempted her to laugh in spite of herself. Then he nodded his head, took her hand in his, and led her upstairs to the drawing-room again. 'What is it you want to ask me? Is it a state secret? The palace is full of spies, and the walls of ears,' said Markham with mock solemnity, 'and I may risk my head by following you. Fair conspirator, what do you want to ask?'

'Oh, Markham, don't laugh at me—it is serious. Please, who is my aunt Clarendon?'

'You little Spartan!' he said; you are a plucky little girl, Fan. You won't betray the daddy, come what may. You are quite right, my dear; but he ought to have told you. I don't approve of him, though I approve of you.'

'Papa has a right to do as he pleases,' said Frances steadily; 'that is not what I asked you, please.'

He stood and smiled at her, patting her on the shoulder. 'I wonder if you will stand by me like that, when you hear me get my due? Who is your aunt Clarendon? She is your father's sister, Fan; I think the only one who is left.'

'Papa's sister! I thought it must be—on the other side.'

'My mother,' said Markham, 'has few relations—which is a misfortune that I bear with equanimity. Mrs. Clarendon married a lawyer a great many years ago, Fan, when he was poor; and now he is very rich, and they will make him a judge one of these days.'

'A judge,' said Frances. 'Then he must be very good and wise. And my aunt——'

'My dear, the wife's qualities are not as yet taken into account. She is very good, I don't doubt; but they don't mean to raise her to the Bench. You must remember when you go there, Fan, that they are *the other side.*'

'What do you mean by "the other side"?' inquired Frances anxiously, fixing her eyes upon the kind, queer, insignificant personage, who yet was so important in this house.

Markham gave forth that little chuckle of a laugh which was his special note of merriment. 'You will soon find it out for yourself,' he replied; 'but the dear old mammy can hold her own. Is that all? for I'm running off; I have an engagement.'

'Oh, not all—not half. I want you to tell me—I want to know—I—I don't know where to begin,' said Frances, with her hand on the sleeve of his coat.

'Nor I,' he retorted with a laugh. 'Let me go now; we'll find an opportunity. Keep your eyes, or rather your ears, open; but don't take all you hear for gospel. Good-bye till to-night. I'm coming to dinner to-night.'

'Don't you live here?' said Frances, accompanying him to the door.

'Not such a fool, thank you,' replied Markham, stopping her gently, and closing the door of the room with care after him as he went away.

Frances was much discouraged by finding nothing but that closed door in front of her where she had been gazing into his ugly but expressive face. It made a sort of dead stop, an emphatic punctuation, marking the end. Why should he say he was not such a fool as to live at home with his mother? Why should he be so *nice* and yet so odd? Why had Constance warned her not to put herself in Markham's hands? All this confused the mind of Frances whenever she began to think. And she did not know what to do with herself. She stole to the window and watched through the white curtains, and saw him go away in the hansom which stood waiting at the door. She felt a vacancy in the house after his departure, the loss of a support, an additional silence and sense of solitude; even something like a panic took possession of her soul. Her impulse was to rush upstairs again and shut herself up in her room. She had never yet been alone with her mother except for a moment. She dreaded the (quite unnecessary, to her thinking) meal which was coming, at which she must sit down opposite to Lady Markham, with that solemn old gentleman, dressed like Mr. Durant, and that gorgeous theatrical figure of a footman, serving the two ladies. Ah, how different from Domenico—poor Domenico, who had called her *carina* from her childhood, and who wept over her hand as he kissed it, when she was coming away. Oh, when should she see these faithful friends again?

'I want you to be quite at your ease with your aunt Clarendon,' said Lady Markham at luncheon, when the servants had left the room. 'She will naturally want to know all about your father and your way of living. We have not talked very much on that subject, my dear, because, for one thing, we have not had much time; and because—— But she will want to know all the little details. And, my darling, I want just to tell you, to warn you. Poor Caroline is not very fond of me. Perhaps it is natural. She may say things to you about your mother——'

'Oh no, mamma,' said Frances, looking up in her mother's face.

'You don't know, my dear. Some people have a great deal of prejudice. Your aunt Caroline, as is quite natural, takes a different view. I wonder if I can make you understand what I mean without using words which I don't want to use?'

'Yes,' said Frances; 'you may trust me, mamma; I think I understand.'

Lady Markham rose and came to where her child sat, and kissed her tenderly. 'My dear, I think you will be a great comfort to me,' she said. 'Constance was always hot-headed. She would not make friends, when I wished her to make friends. The Clarendons are very rich; they have no children, Frances. Naturally, I wish you to stand well with them. Besides, I would not allow her to suppose for a moment that I would keep you from her—that is what I call conscience, and Markham pride.'

Frances did not know what to reply. She did not understand what the wealth of the Clarendons had to do with it; everything else she could understand. She was very willing, nay, eager to see her father's sister, yet very determined that no one should say a word to her to the detriment of her mother. So far as that went, in her own mind all was clear.

## CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. CLARENDON lived in one of the great houses in Portland Place which fashion has abandoned. It was very silent, wrapped in that stillness and decorum which is one of the chief signs of an entirely well-regulated house, also of a place in which life is languid and youth does not exist. Frances followed her mother with a beating heart through the long wide hall and large staircase, over soft carpets, on which their feet made no sound. She thought they were stealing in like ghosts to some silent place in which mystery of one kind or other must attend them; but the room they were ushered into was only a very large, very still drawing-room, in painfully good order, inhabited by nothing but a fire, which made a little sound and flicker that preserved it from utter death. The blinds were drawn half over the windows; the long curtains hung down in dark folds. There were none of the quaintnesses, the modern æstheticisms, the crowds of small picturesque articles of furniture impeding progress, in which Lady Markham delighted. The furniture was all solid, durable—what upholsterers call very handsome—huge mirrors over the mantelpieces, a few large portraits in chalk on the walls, solemn ornaments on the table; a large and brilliantly-painted china flower-pot enclosing a large plant of the palm kind, dark-green and solemn, like everything else, holding the place of honour. It was very warm and comfortable, full of low easy-chairs and sofas, but at the same time very severe and forbidding, like a place into which the common occupations of life were never brought.

'She never sits here,' said Lady Markham in a low tone. 'She has a morning-room that is cosy enough. She comes up here after dinner, when Mr. Clarendon takes a nap before he looks over his briefs; and he comes up at ten o'clock for ten minutes and takes a cup of tea. Then she goes to bed. That is about all the intercourse they have, and all the time the drawing-room is occupied, except when people come to call. That is why it has such a depressing look.'

'Is she not happy, then?' said Frances wistfully, which was a silly question, as she now saw as soon as she had uttered it.

'Happy! Oh, probably just as happy as other people. That is not a question that is ever asked in Society, my dear. Why shouldn't she be happy? She has everything she has ever wished for—plenty of money—for they are very rich—her husband quite distinguished in his sphere, and in the way of advancement. What could she want more? She is a lucky woman, as women go.'

'Still she must be dull, with no one to speak to,' said Frances, looking round her with a glance of dismay. What she thought was, that it would probably be her duty to come here to make a little society for her aunt, and her heart sank at the sight of this decent, nay, handsome gloom, with a sensation which Mariuccia's kitchen at home, which only looked on the court, or the dimly-lighted rooms of the villagers, had never given her. The silence was terrible, and struck a chill to her heart. Then all at once the door opened, and Mrs. Clarendon came in, taking the young visitor entirely by surprise; for the soft carpets and thick curtains so entirely shut out all sound, that she seemed to glide in like a ghost to the ghosts already there. Frances, unaccustomed to English comfort, was startled by the absence of sound, and missed the indication of the footstep on the polished floor, which had so often warned her to lay aside her innocent youthful visions at the sound of her father's approach. Mrs. Clarendon coming in so softly seemed to arrest them in the midst of their talk about her, bringing a flush to Frances' face. She was a tall woman, fair and pale, with cold gray eyes, and an air which was like that of her rooms—the air of being unused, of being put against the wall like the handsome furniture. She came up stiffly to Lady Markham, who went to meet her with effusion, holding out both hands.

'I am so glad to see you, Caroline. I feared you might be out, as it was such a beautiful day.'

'Is it a beautiful day? It seemed to me cold, looking out. I am not very energetic, you know—not like you. Have I seen this young lady before?'

'You have not seen her for a long time—not since she was a child; nor I either, which is more wonderful. This is Frances. Caroline, I told you I expected——'

'My brother's child!' Mrs. Clarendon said, fixing her eyes upon the girl, who came forward with shy eagerness. She did not open her arms, as Frances expected. She inspected her carefully and coldly, and ended by saying, 'But she is like you,' with a certain tone of reproach.

'That is not my fault,' said Lady Markham, almost sharply; and then she added: 'For the matter of that, they are both your brother's children—though, unfortunately, mine too.'

'You know my opinion on that matter,' said Mrs. Clarendon; and then, and not till then, she gave Frances her hand, and, stooping, kissed her on the cheek. 'Your father writes very seldom, and I have never heard a word from you. All the same, I have always taken an interest in you. It must be very sad for you, after the life to which you have been accustomed, to be suddenly sent here without any will of your own.'

'Oh no,' said Frances. 'I was very glad to come, to see mamma.'

'That's the proper thing to say, of course,' the other said with a cold smile. There was just enough of a family likeness to her father to arrest Frances in her indignation. She was not allowed time to make an answer, even had she possessed confidence enough to do so, for her aunt went on, without looking at her again: 'I suppose you have heard from Constance? It must be difficult for her too, to reconcile herself with the different kind of life. My brother's quiet ways are not likely to suit a young lady about town.'

'Frances will be able to tell you all about it,' said Lady Markham, who kept her temper with astonishing self-control. 'She only arrived last night. I would not delay a moment in bringing her to you. Of course, you will like to hear. Markham, who went to fetch his sister, is of opinion that on the whole the change will do Constance good.'

'I don't at all doubt it will do her good. To associate with my brother would do any one good—who is worthy of it; but of course it will be a great change for her. And this child will be kept just long enough to be infected with worldly ways, and then sent back to him spoilt for his life. I suppose, Lady Markham, that is what you intend?'

'You are so determined to think badly of me,' said Lady Markham, 'that it is vain for me to say anything; or else I might remind you that Con's going off was a greater surprise to me than to any one. You know what were my views for her?'

'Yes. I rather wonder why you take the trouble to acquaint me with your plans,' Mrs. Clarendon said.

'It is foolish, perhaps; but I have a feeling that as Edward's only near relation——'

'Oh, I am sure I am much obliged to you for your consideration,' the other cried quickly. 'Constance was never influenced by me; though I don't wonder that her soul revolted at such a marriage as you had prepared for her.'

'Why?' cried Lady Markham quickly, with an astonished glance. Then she added with a smile: 'I am afraid you will see nothing but harm in any plan of mine. Unfortunately, Con did not like the gentleman whom I approved. I should not have put any force upon her. One can't nowadays, if one wished to. It is contrary, as she says herself, to the spirit of the times. But if you will allow me to say so, Caroline, Con is too like her father to bear anything, to put up with anything that——'

'Thank heaven!' cried Mrs. Clarendon. She is indeed a little like her dear father, notwithstanding a training so different. And this one, I suppose—this one you find like you?'

'I am happy to think she is a little, in externals at least,' said Lady Markham, taking Frances' hand in her own. 'But Edward has brought her up, Caroline; that should be a passport to your affections at least.'

Upon this, Mrs. Clarendon came down as from a pedestal, and addressed herself to the girl, over whose astonished head this strange dialogue had gone. 'I am afraid, my dear, you will think me very hard and disagreeable,' she said. 'I will not tell you why, though I think I could make out a case. How is your dear father? He writes seldomer and seldomer—sometimes not even at Christmas; and I am afraid you have little sense of family duties, which is a pity at your age.'

Frances did not know how to reply to this accusation, and she was confused and indignant, and little disposed to attempt to please. 'Papa,' she said, 'is very well. I have heard him say that he could not write letters—our life was so quiet: there was nothing to say.'

'Ah, my dear, that is all very well for strangers, or for those who care more about the outside than the heart. But he might have known that anything, everything would be interesting to me. It is just your quiet life that I like to hear about. Society has little attraction for me. I suppose you are half an Italian, are you? and know nothing about English life.'

'She looks nothing but English,' said Lady Markham in a sort of parenthesis.

'The only people I know are English,' said Frances. 'Papa is not fond of society. We see the Gaunts and the Durants, but nobody else. I have always tried to be like my own country-people, as well as I could.'

'And with great success, my dear,' said her mother with a smiling look.

Mrs. Clarendon said nothing, but looked at her with silent criticism. Then she turned to Lady Markham. 'Naturally,' she said, 'I should like to make acquaintance with my niece, and hear all the details about my dear brother; but that can't be done in a morning call. Will you leave her with me for the day? Or may I have her to-morrow, or the day after? Any time will suit me.'

'She only arrived last night, Caroline. I suppose even you will allow that the mother should come first. Thursday, Frances shall spend with you, if that suits you?'

'Thursday, the third day,' said Mrs. Clarendon, ostentatiously counting on her fingers—'during which interval you will have full time—— Oh yes, Thursday will suit me. The mother, of course, conventionally, has, as you say, the first right.'

'Conventionally and naturally too,' Lady Markham replied; and then there was a silence, and they sat looking at each other. Frances, who felt her innocent self to be something like the bone of contention over which these two ladies were wrangling, sat with downcast eyes confused and indignant, not knowing what to do or say. The mistress of the house did nothing to dissipate the embarrassment of the moment: she seemed to have no wish to set her visitors at their ease, and the pause, during which the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the occasional fall of ashes from the fire came in as a sort of chorus or symphony, loud and distinct, to fill up the interval, was half painful, half ludicrous. It seemed to the quick ears of the girl thus suddenly introduced into the arena of domestic conflict, that there was a certain irony in this inarticulate commentary upon those petty miseries of life.

At last, at the end of what seemed half an hour of silence, Lady Markham rose and spread her wings—or at least shook out her silken draperies, which comes to the same thing. 'As that is settled, we need not detain you any longer,' she said.

Mrs. Clarendon rose too, slowly. 'I cannot expect,' she replied, 'that you can give up your valuable time to me; but mine is not so much occupied. I will expect you, Frances, before one o'clock on Thursday. I lunch at one; and then if there is anything you want to see or do, I shall be glad to take you wherever you like. I suppose I may keep her to dinner? Mr. Clarendon will like to make acquaintance with his niece.'

'Oh, certainly; as long as you and she please,' said Lady Markham with a smile. 'I am not a medieval parent, as poor Con says.'

'Yet it was on that ground that Constance abandoned you and ran away to her father,' quoth the implacable antagonist.

Lady Markham, calm as she was, grew red to her hair. 'I don't think Constance has abandoned me,' she cried hastily; 'and if she has, the fault is—— But there is no discussion possible between people so hopelessly of different opinions as you and I,' she added, recovering her composure. 'Mr. Clarendon is well, I hope?'

'Very well. Good morning, since you will go,' said the mistress of the house. She dropped another cold kiss upon Frances' cheek. It seemed to the girl, indeed, who was angry and horrified, that it was her aunt's nose, which was a long one and very chilly, which touched her. She made no response to this nasal salutation. She felt, indeed, that to give a slap to that other cheek would be much more expressive of her sentiments than a kiss, and followed her mother downstairs hot with resentment. Lady Markham, too, was moved. When she got into the brougham, she leant back in her corner and put her handkerchief lightly to the corner of each eye. Then she laughed, and laid her hand upon Frances' arm.

'You are not to think I am grieving,' she said; 'it is only rage. Did you ever know such a——? But, my dear, we must recollect that it is natural—that she is on *the other side.*'

'Is it natural to be so unkind, to be so cruel?' cried Frances. 'Then, mamma, I shall hate England, where I once thought everything was good.'

'Everything is not good anywhere, my love; and Society, I fear, above all, is far from being perfect,—not that your poor dear aunt Caroline can be said to be in Society,' Lady Markham added, recovering her spirits. 'I don't think they see anybody but a few lawyers like themselves.'

'But, mamma, why do you go to see her? Why do you endure it? You promised for me, or I should never go back, neither on Thursday nor any other time.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Frances, my dear! I hope you have not got those headstrong Waring ways. Because she hates me, that is no reason why she should hate you. Even Con saw as much as that. You are of her own blood, and her near relation; and I never heard that *he* took very much to any of the young people on his side. And they are very rich. A man like that, at the head of his profession, must be coining money. It would be wicked of me, for any little tempers of mine, to risk what might be a fortune for my children. And you know I have very little more than my jointure, and your father is not rich.'

This exposition of motives was like another language to Frances. She gazed at her mother's soft face, so full of sweetness and kindness, with a sense that Lady Markham was under the sway of motives and influences which had been left out in her own simple education. Was it supreme and self-denying generosity, or was it—something else? The girl was too inexperienced, too ignorant to tell. But the contrast between Lady Markham's wonderful temper and forbearance, and the harsh and ungenerous tone of her aunt, moved her heart out of the region of reason. 'If you put up with all that for us, I cannot see any reason why we should put up with it for you?' she cried indignantly. 'She cannot have any right to speak to my mother so—and before me.'

'Ah, my darling, that is just the sweetness of it to her. If we were alone, I should not mind; she might say what she liked. It is because of you that she can make me feel—a little. But you must take no notice; you must leave me to fight my own battles.'

'Why?' Frances flung up her young head, till she looked about a foot taller than her mother. 'I will never endure it, mamma; you may say what you like. What is her fortune to me?'

'My love!' she exclaimed; 'why, you little savage, her fortune is everything to you! It may make all the difference.' Then she laughed rather tremulously, and leaning over, bestowed a kiss upon her stranger-child's half-reluctant cheek. 'It is very, very sweet of you to make a stand for your mother,' she said, 'and when you know so little of me. The horrid people in Society would say that was the reason; but I think you would defend your mother anyhow, my Frances, my child that I have always missed! But look here, dear: you must not do it. I am old enough to take care of myself. And your poor aunt Clarendon is not so bad as you think. She believes she has reason for it. She is very fond of your father, and she has not seen him for a dozen years; and there is no telling whether she may ever see him again; and she thinks it is my fault. So you must not take up arms on my behalf till you know better. And it would be so much to your advantage if she should take a fancy to you, my dear. Do you think I could ever reconcile myself, for any *amour-propre* of mine, to stand in my child's way?'

Once more, Frances was unable to make any reply. All the lines of sentiment and sense to which she had been accustomed seemed to be getting blurred out. Where she had come from, a family stood together, shoulder by shoulder. They defended each other, and even revenged each other; and though the law might disapprove, public opinion stood by them. A child who looked on careless while its parents were assailed would have been to Mariuccia an odious monster. Her father's opinions on such a subject Frances had never known; but as for fortune, he would have smiled that disdainful smile of his at the suggestion that she should pay court to any one because he was rich. Wealth meant having few wants, she had heard him say a thousand times. It might even have been supposed from his conversation that he scorned rich people for being rich, which of course was an exaggeration. But he could never, never have wished her to endeavour to please an unkind, disagreeable person because of her money. That was impossible. So that she made no reply, and scarcely even, in her confusion, responded to the caress with which her mother thanked her for the partisanship, which it appeared was so out of place.

## CHAPTER XXIV

FRANCES had not succeeded in resolving this question in her mind when Thursday came. The two intervening days had been very quiet. She had gone with her mother to several shops, and had stood by almost passive and much astonished while a mulitude of little luxuries which she had never been sufficiently enlightened even to wish for, were bought for her. She was so little accustomed to lavish expenditure, that it was almost with a sense of wrong-doing that she contemplated all these costly trifles, which were for the use not of some typical fine lady, but of herself, Frances, who had never thought it possible she could ever be classed under that title. To Lady Markham these delicacies were evidently necessaries of life. And then it was for the first time that Frances learned what an evening dress meant—not only the garment itself, but the shoes, the stockings, the gloves, the ribbons, the fan, a hundred little accessories which she had never so much as thought of. When you have nothing but a set of coral or amber beads to wear with your white frock, it is astonishing how much that matter is simplified. Lady Markham opened her jewel-boxes to provide for the same endless roll of necessities. 'This will go with the white dress, and this with the pink,' she said, thus revealing to Frances another delicacy of accord unsuspected by her simplicity.

'But, mamma, you are giving me so many things!'

'Not your share yet,' said Lady Markham. And she added: 'But don't say anything of this to your aunt Clarendon. She will probably give you something out of her hoards, if she thinks you are not provided.'

This speech checked the pleasure and gratitude of Frances. She stopped with a little gasp in her eager thanks. She wanted nothing from her aunt Clarendon, she said to herself with indignation, nor from her mother either. If they would but let her keep her ignorance, her pleasure in any simple gift, and not represent her, even to herself, as a little schemer, trying how much she could get! Frances cried rather than smiled over her turquoises and the set of old gold ornaments, which, but for that little speech, would have made her happy. The suggestion put gall into everything, and made the timid question in her mind as to Lady Markham's generous forbearance with her sister-in-law more difficult than ever. Why did she bear it? She ought not to have borne it—not for a day.

On the Wednesday evening before the visit to Portland Place, to which she looked with so much alarm, two gentlemen came to dinner at the invitation of Markham. The idea of two gentlemen to dinner produced no exciting effect upon Frances so as to withdraw her mind from the trial that was coming. Gentlemen were the only portion of the creation with which she was more or less acquainted. Even in the old Palazzo, a guest of this description had been occasionally received, and had sat discussing some point of antiquarian lore, or something about the old books at Colla, with her father without taking any notice, beyond what civility demanded, of the little girl who sat at the head of the table. She did not doubt it would be the same thing to-night; and though Markham was always *nice*, never leaving her out, never letting the conversation drop altogether into that stream of personality or allusion which makes Society so intolerable to a stranger, she yet prepared for the evening with the feeling that dulness awaited her, and not pleasure. One of the guests, however, was of a kind which Frances did not expect. He was young, very young in appearance, rather small and delicate, but at the same time refined, with a look of gentle melancholy upon a countenance which was almost beautiful, with childlike limpid eyes, and features of extreme delicacy and purity. This was something quite unlike the elderly antiquarians who talked so glibly to her father about Roman remains or Etruscan art. He sat between Lady Markham and herself, and spoke in gentle tones, with a soft affectionate manner, to her mother, who replied with the kindness and easy affectionateness which were habitual to her. To see the sweet looks which this young gentleman received, and to hear the tender questions about his health and his occupations which Lady Markham put to him, awoke in the mind of Frances another doubt of the same character as those others from which she had not been able to get free. Was this sympathetic tone, this air of tender interest, put on at will for the benefit of everybody with whom Lady Markham spoke? Frances hated herself for the instinctive question which rose in her, and for the suspicions which crept into her mind on every side and undermined all her pleasure. The other stranger opposite to her was old—to her youthful eyes—and called forth no interest at all. But the gentleness and melancholy, the low voice, the delicate features, something plaintive and appealing about the youth by her side, attracted her interest in spite of herself. He said little to her, but from time to time she caught him looking at her with a sort of questioning glance. When the ladies left the table, and Frances and her mother were alone in the drawing-room, Lady Markham, who had said nothing for some minutes, suddenly turned and asked: 'What did you think of him, Frances?' as if it were the most natural question in the world.

'Of whom?' said Frances in her astonishment.

'Of Claude, my dear. Whom else? Sir Thomas could be of no particular interest either to you or me.'

'I did not know their names, mamma; I scarcely heard them. Claude is the young gentleman who sat next to you?'

'And to you also, Frances. But not only that. He is the man of whom, I suppose, Constance has told you—to avoid whom she left home, and ran away from me. Oh, the words come quite appropriate, though I could not bear them from the mouth of Caroline Clarendon. She abandoned me, and threw herself upon your father's protection, because of——'

Frances had listened with a sort of consternation. When her mother paused for breath, she filled up the interval: 'That little, gentle, small, young man!'

Lady Markham looked for a moment as if she would be angry; then she took the better way, and laughed. 'He is little and young,' she said; 'but neither so young nor even so small as you think. He is most wonderfully, portentously rich, my dear; and he is very nice and good and intelligent and generous. You must not take up a prejudice against him because he is not an athlete or a giant. There are plenty of athletes in Society, my love, but very, very few with a hundred thousand a-year.'

'It is so strange to me to hear about money,' said Frances. 'I hope you will pardon me, mamma. I don't understand. I thought he was perhaps some one who was delicate, whose mother, perhaps, you knew, whom you wanted to be kind to.'

'Quite true,' said Lady Markham, patting her daughter's cheek with a soft finger; 'and well judged: but something more besides. I thought, I allow, that it would be an excellent match for Constance; not only because he was rich, but *also* because he was rich. Do you see the difference?'

'I—suppose so,' Frances said; but there was not any warmth in the admission. 'I thought the right way,' she added after a moment, with a blush that stole over her from head to foot, 'was that people fell in love with each other.'

'So it is,' said her mother, smiling upon her. 'But it often happens, you know, that they fall in love respectively with the wrong people.'

'It is dreadful to me to talk to you, who know so much better,' cried Frances. 'All that *I* know is from stories. But I thought that even a wrong person, whom you chose yourself, was better than——'

'The right person chosen by your mother? These are awful doctrines, Frances. You are a little revolutionary. Who taught you such terrible things?' Lady Markham laughed as she spoke, and patted the girl's cheek more affectionately than ever, and looked at her with unclouded smiles, so that Frances took courage. 'But,' the mother went on, 'there was no question of choice on my part. Constance has known Claude Ramsay all her life. She liked him, so far as I knew. I supposed she had accepted him. It was not formally announced, I am happy to say; but I made sure of it, and so did everybody else—including himself, poor fellow—when, suddenly, without any warning, your sister disappeared. It was unkind to me, Frances,—oh, it was unkind to me!'

And suddenly, while she was speaking, two tears appeared all at once in Lady Markham's eyes.

Frances was deeply touched by this sight. She ventured upon a caress, which as yet, except in timid return, to those bestowed upon her, she had not been bold enough to do. 'I do not think Constance can have meant to be unkind,' she said.

'Few people mean to be unkind,' said this social philosopher, who knew so much more than Frances. 'Your aunt Clarendon does, and that makes her harmless, because one understands. Most of those who wound one, do it because it pleases themselves, without meaning anything—or caring anything—don't you see?—whether it hurts or not.'

This was too profound a saying to be understood at the first moment, and Frances had no reply to make to it. She said only by way of apology, 'But Markham approved?'

'My love,' said her mother, 'Markham is an excellent son to me. He rarely wounds me himself—which is perhaps because he rarely does anything particular himself—but he is not always a safe guide. It makes me very happy to see that you take to him, though you must have heard many things against him; but he is not a safe guide. Hush! here are the men coming upstairs. If Claude talks to you, be as gentle with him as you can—and sympathetic, if you can,' she said quickly, rising from her chair, and moving in her noiseless easy way to the other side. Frances felt as if there was a meaning even in this movement, which left herself alone with a vacant seat beside her; but she was confused as usual by all the novelty, and did not understand what the meaning was.

It was balked, however, if it had anything to do with Mr. Ramsay, for it was the other gentleman—the old gentleman, as Frances called him in her thoughts—who came up and took the vacant place. The old gentleman was a man about forty-five, with a few gray hairs among the brown, and a well-knit manly figure, which showed very well between the delicate youth on the one hand and Markham's insignificance on the other. He was Sir Thomas, whom Lady Markham had declared to be of no particular interest to any one; but he evidently had sense enough to see the charm of simplicity and youth. The attention of Frances was sadly distracted by the movements of Claude, who fidgeted about from one table to another, looking at the books and the nick-nacks upon them, and staring at the pictures on the walls, then finally came and stood by Markham's side in front of the fire. He did well to contrast himself with Markham. He was taller, and the beauty of his countenance showed still more strikingly in contrast with Markham's odd little wrinkled face. Frances was distracted by the look which he kept fixed upon herself, and which diverted her attention in spite of herself away from the talk of Sir Thomas, who was, however, very *nice*, and, she felt sure, most interesting and instructive, as became his advanced age, if only she could attend to what he was saying. But what with the lively talk which her mother carried on with Markham, and to which she could not help listening all through the conversation of Sir Thomas, and the movements and glances of the melancholy young lover, she could not fix her mind upon the remarks that were addressed to her own ear. When Claude began to join languidly in the other talk, it was more difficult still. 'You have got a new picture, Lady Markham,' she heard him say; and a sudden quickening of her attention and another wave of colour and heat passing over her, arrested even Sir Thomas in the much more interesting observation which presumably he was about to make. He paused, as if he, too, waited to hear Lady Markham's reply.

'Shall we call it a picture? It is my little girl's sketch from her window where she has been living—her present to her mother; and I think it is delightful, though in the circumstances I don't pretend to be a judge.'

Where she has been living! Frances grew redder and hotter in the flush of indignation that went over her. But she could not stand up and proclaim that it was from her home, her dear loggia, the place she loved best in the world, that the sketch was made. Already the bonds of another life were upon her, and she dared not do that. And then there was a little chorus of praise, which silenced her still more effectually. It was the group of palms which she had been so simply proud of, which—as she had never forgotten—had made her father say that she had grown up. Lady Markham had placed it on a small easel on her table; but Frances could not help feeling that this was less for any pleasure it gave her mother, than in order to make a little exhibition of her own powers. It was, to be sure, in her own honour that this was done—and what so natural as that the mother should seek to do her daughter honour? but Frances was deeply sensitive, and painfully conscious of the strange tangled web of motives, which she had never in her life known anything about before. Had the little picture been hung in her mother's bedroom, and seen by no eyes but her own, the girl would have found the most perfect pleasure in it; but here, exhibited as in a public gallery, examined by admiring eyes, calling forth all the incense of praise, it was with a mixture of shame and resentment that Frances found it out. It produced this result, however, that Sir Thomas rose, as in duty bound, to examine the performance of the daughter of the house; and presently young Ramsay, who had been watching his opportunity, took the place by her side.

'I have been waiting for this,' he said, with his air of pathos. 'I have so many things to ask you, if you will let me, Miss Waring.'

'Surely,' Frances said.

'Your sketch is very sweet—it is full of feeling—there is no colour like that of the Riviera. It is the Riviera, is it not?'

'Oh yes,' cried Frances, eager to seize the opportunity of making it apparent that it was not only where she had been living, as her mother said. 'It is from Bordighera, from our loggia, where I have lived all my life.'

'You will find no colour and no vegetation like that near London,' the young man said.

To this Frances replied politely that London was full of much more wonderful things, as she had always heard; but felt somewhat disappointed, supposing that his communications to her were to be more interesting than this.

'And the climate is so very different,' he continued. 'I am very often sent out of England for the winter, though this year they have let me stay. I have been at Nice two seasons. I suppose you know Nice? It is a very pretty place; but the wind is just as cold sometimes as at home. You have to keep in the sun; and if you always keep in the sun, it is warm even here.'

'But there is not always sun here,' said Frances.

'That is very true; that is a very clever remark. There is not always sun here. San Remo was beginning to be known when I was there; but I never heard of Bordighera as a place where people went to stay. Some Italian wrote a book about it, I have heard—to push it, no doubt. Could you recommend it as a winter-place, Miss Waring? I suppose it is very dull, nothing going on?'

'Oh, nothing at all,' cried Frances eagerly. 'All the tourists complain that there is nothing to do.'

'I thought so,' he said; 'a regular little Italian dead-alive place.' Then he added after a moment's pause: 'But of course there are inducements which might make one put up with that if the air happened to suit one. Are there villas to be had, can you tell me? They say, as a matter of fact, that you get more advantage of the air when you are in a dull place.'

'There are hotels,' said Frances more and more disappointed, though the beginning of this speech had given her a little hope.

'Good hotels?' he said with interest. 'Sometimes they are really better than a place of one's own, where the drainage is often bad, and the exposure not all that could be desired. And then you get any amusement that may be going. Perhaps you will tell me the names of one or two? for if this east wind continues, my doctors may send me off even now.'

Frances looked into his limpid eyes and expressive countenance with dismay. He must look, she felt sure, as if he were making the most touching confidences to her. His soft pathetic voice gave a *faux air* of something sentimental to those questions, which even she could not persuade herself meant nothing. Was it to show that he was bent upon following Constance wherever she might go? That must be the true meaning, she supposed. He must be endeavouring by this mock-anxiety to find out how much she knew of his real motives, and whether he might trust to her or not. But Frances resented a little the unnecessary precaution.

'I don't know anything about the hotels,' she said. 'I have never thought of the air. It is my home—that is all.'

'You look so well, that I am the more convinced it would be a good place for me,' said the young man. 'You look in such thorough good health, if you will allow me to say so. Some ladies don't like to be told that; but I think it the most delightful thing in existence. Tell me, had you any trouble with drainage, when you went to settle there? And is the water good? and how long does the season last? I am afraid I am teasing you with my questions; but all these details are so important—and one is so pleased to hear of a new place.'

'We live up in the old town,' said Frances with a sudden flash of malice. 'I don't know what drainage is, and neither does any one else there. We have our fountain in the court—our own well. And I don't think there is any season. We go up among the mountains, when it gets too hot.'

'Your well in the court!' said the sentimental Claude, with the look of a poet who has just been told that his dearest friend is killed by an accident,—'with everything percolating into it! That is terrible indeed. But,' he said, after a pause, an ethereal sense of consolation stealing over his fine features—'there are exceptions, they say, to every rule; and sometimes, with fine health such as you have, bad sanitary conditions do not seem to tell—*when there has been no stirring-up.* I believe that is at the root of the whole question. People can go on, on the old system, so long as there is no stirring-up; but when once a beginning has been made, it must be complete, or it is fatal.'

He said this with animation much greater than he had shown as yet; then dropping into his habitual pathos: 'If I come in for tea to-morrow—Lady Markham allows me to do it, when I can, when the weather is fit for going out—will you be so very kind as to give me half an hour, Miss Waring, for a few particulars? I will take them down from your lips—it is so much the most satisfactory way; and perhaps you would add to your kindness by just thinking it over beforehand—if there is anything I ought to know.'

'But I am going out to-morrow, Mr. Ramsay.'

'Then after to-morrow,' he said; and rising with a bow full of tender deference, went up to Lady Markham to bid her good-night. 'I have been having a most interesting conversation with Miss Waring. She has given me so many *renseignements*,' he said. 'She permits me to come after to-morrow for further particulars. Dear Lady Markham, good-night and *à revoir*.'

'What was Claude saying to you, Frances?' Lady Markham asked with a little anxiety, when everybody save Markham was gone, and they were alone.

'He asked me about Bordighera, mamma.'

'Poor dear boy! About Con, and what she had said of him? He has a faithful heart, though people think him a little too much taken up with himself.'

'He did not say anything about Constance. He asked about the climate and the drains—what are drains?—and if the water was good, and what hotel I could recommend.'

Lady Markham laughed and coloured slightly, and tapped Frances on the cheek. 'You are a little satirical——! Dear Claude! he is very anxious about his health. But don't you see,' she added, 'that was all a covert way of finding out about Con? He wants to go after her; but he does not want to let everybody in the world see that he has gone after a girl who would not have him. I have a great deal of sympathy with him, for my part.'

Frances had no sympathy with him. She felt, on the other hand, more sympathy for Constance than had moved her yet. To escape from such a lover, Frances thought a girl might be justified in flying to the end of the world. But it never entered into her mind that any like danger to herself was to be thought of. She dismissed Claude Ramsay from her thoughts with half resentment, half amusement, wondering that Constance had not told her more; but feeling, as no such image had ever risen on her horizon before, that she would not have believed Constance. However, her sister had happily escaped, and to herself Claude Ramsay was nothing. Far more important was it to think of the ordeal of to-morrow. She shivered a little even in her warm room as she anticipated it. England seemed to be colder, grayer, more devoid of brightness in Portland Place than in Eaton Square.

## CHAPTER XXV

FRANCES went to Portland Place next day. She went with great reluctance, feeling that to be thus plunged into the atmosphere of the other side was intolerable. Had she been able to feel that there was absolute right on either side, it would not have been so difficult for her. But she knew so little of the facts of the case, and her natural prepossessions were so curiously double and variable, that every encounter was painful. To be swept into the faction of the other side, when the first impassioned sentiment with which she had felt her mother's arms around her had begun to sink inevitably into that silent judgment of another individual's ways and utterances which is the hindrance of reason to every enthusiasm—was doubly hard. She was resolute indeed that not a word or insinuation against her mother should be permitted in her presence. But she herself had a hundred little doubts and questions in her mind, traitors whose very existence no one must suspect but herself. Her natural revulsion from the thought of being forced into partisanship gave her a feeling of strong opposition and resistance against everything that might be said to her, when she stepped into the solemn house in Portland Place, where everything was so large, empty, and still, so different from her mother's warm and cheerful abode. The manner in which her aunt met her strengthened this feeling. On their previous meeting, in Lady Markham's presence, the greeting given her by Mrs. Clarendon had chilled her through and through. She was ushered in now to the same still room, with its unused look, with all the chairs in their right places, and no litter of habitation about; but her aunt came to her with a different aspect from that which she had borne before. She came quickly, almost with a rush, and took the shrinking girl into her arms. 'My dear little Frances, my dear child, my brother's own little girl!' she cried, kissing her again and again. Her ascetic countenance was transfigured, her gray eyes warmed and shone.

Frances could not make any eager response to this warmth. She did her best to look the gratification which she knew she ought to have felt, and to return her aunt's caresses with due fervour; but in her heart there was a chill of which she felt ashamed, and a sense of insincerity which was very foreign to her nature. All through these strange experiences, Frances felt herself insincere. She had not known how to respond even to her mother, and a cold sense that she was among strangers had crept in even in the midst of the bewildering certainty that she was with her nearest relations and in her mother's house. In present circumstances, 'How do you do, aunt Caroline?' was the only commonplace phrase she could find to say, in answer to the effusion of affection with which she was received.

'Now we can talk,' said Mrs. Clarendon, leading her with both hands in hers to a sofa near the fire. 'While my lady was here it was impossible. You must have thought me cold, when my heart was just running over to my dear brother's favourite child. But I could not open my heart before her,—I never could do it. And there is so much to ask you. For though I would not let her know I had never heard, you know very well, my dear, I can't deceive you. O Frances, why doesn't he write? Surely, surely, he must have known I would never betray him—to *her*, or any of her race.'

'Aunt Caroline, please remember you are speaking of——'

'Oh, I can't stand on ceremony with you! I can't do it.

Constance, that had been always with her, that was another thing. But you, my dear, dear child! And you must not stand on ceremony with me. I can understand you, if no one else can. And as for expecting you to love her and honour her and so forth, a woman whom you have never seen before, who has spoiled your dear father's life——'

Frances had put up her hand to stay this flood, but in vain. With eyes that flashed with excitement, the quiet still gray woman was strangely transformed. A vivacious and animated person, when moved by passion, is not so alarming as a reserved and silent one. There was a force of fury and hatred in her tone and looks which appalled the girl. She interrupted almost rudely, insisting upon being heard, as soon as Mrs. Glarendon paused for breath.

'You must not speak to me so; you must not—you shall not! I will not hear it.'

Frances was quiet too, and there was in her also the vehemence of a tranquil nature transported beyond all ordinary bounds.

Mrs. Clarendon stopped and looked at her fixedly, then suddenly changed her tone. 'Your father might have written to me,' she said—'he might have written to *me*. He is my only brother, and I am all that remains of the family, now that Minnie, poor Minnie, who was so much mixed up with it all, is gone. It was natural enough that he should go away. I always understood him, if nobody else did; but he might have trusted his own family, who would never, never have betrayed him. And to think that I should owe my knowledge of him now to that ill-grown, ill-conditioned—— O Frances, it was a bitter pill! To owe my knowledge of my brother and of you and everything about you to Markham—I shall never be able to forget how bitter it was.'

'You forget that Markham is my brother, aunt Caroline.'

'He is nothing of the sort. He is your half-brother, if you care to keep up the connection at all. But some people don't think much of it. It is the father's side that counts. But don't let us argue about that. Tell me how is your father? Tell me all about him. I love you dearly, for his sake; but above everything, I want to hear about him. I never had any other brother. How is he, Frances? To think that I should never have seen or heard of him for twelve long years!'

'My father is—very well,' said Frances, with a sort of strangulation both in heart and voice, not knowing what to say.

'"Very well!" Oh, that is not much to satisfy me with, after so long! Where is he—and how is he living—and have you been a very good child to him, Frances? He deserves a good child, for he was a good son. Oh, tell me a little about him. Did he tell you everything about us? Did he say how fond and how proud we were of him? and how happy we used to be at home all together? He must have told you. If you knew how I go back to those old days! We were such a happy united family. Life is always disappointing. It does not bring you what you think, and it is not everybody that has the comfort we have in looking back upon their youth. He must have told you of our happy life at home.'

Frances had kept the secret of her father's silence from every one who had a right to blame him for it. But here she felt herself to be bound by no such precaution. His sister was on his side. It was in his defence and in passionate partisanship for him that she had assailed the mother to the child. Frances had even a momentary angry pleasure in telling the truth without mitigation or softening. 'I don't know whether you will believe me,' she said, 'but my father told me nothing. He never said a word to me about his past life or any one connected with him; neither you nor—any one.' Though she had the kindest heart in the world, and never had harmed a living creature, it gave Frances almost a little pang of pleasure to deliver this blow.

Mrs. Clarendon received it, so to speak, full in the face, as she leaned forward, eagerly waiting for what Frances had to say. She looked at the girl aghast, the colour changing in her face, a sudden exclamation dying away in her throat. But after the first keen sensation, she drew herself together and regained her self-control. 'Yes, yes,' she cried; 'I understand. He could not enter into anything about us without telling you of—others. He was always full of good feeling—and so just! No doubt, he thought if you heard our side, you should hear the other. But when you were coming away

—when he knew you must hear everything, what message did he give you for me?'

In sight of the anxiety which shone in her aunt's eyes, and the eager bend towards her of the rigid straight figure not used to any yielding, Frances began to feel as if she were the culprit. 'Indeed,' she said, hesitating, 'he never said anything. I came here in ignorance. I never knew I had a mother till Constance came—nor any relations. I heard of my aunt for the first time from—mamma; and then to conceal my ignorance, I asked Markham; I wanted no one to know.'

It was some minutes before Mrs. Clarendon spoke. Her eyes slowly filled with tears, as she kept them fixed upon Frances. The blow went very deep; it struck at illusions which were perhaps more dear than anything in her actual existence. 'You heard of me for the first time from—— Oh, that was cruel, that was cruel of Edward,' she cried, clasping her hands together—'of me for the first time—and you had to ask Markham! And I, that was his favourite sister, and that never forgot him, never for a day!'

Frances put her own soft young hands upon those which her aunt wrung convulsively together in the face of this sudden pang. 'I think he had tried to forget his old life altogether,' she said; 'or perhaps it was because he thought so much of it that he could not tell me—I was so ignorant! He would have been obliged to tell me so much, if he had told me anything. Aunt Caroline, I don't think he meant to be unkind.'

Mrs. Clarendon shook her head; then she turned upon her comforter with a sort of indignation. 'And you,' she said, 'did you never want to know? Did you never wonder how it was that he was there, vegetating in a little foreign place, a man of his gifts? Did you never ask whom you belonged to, what friends you had at home? I am afraid,' she cried suddenly, rising to her feet, throwing off the girl's hand, which had still held hers, 'that you are like your mother in your heart as well as your face—a self-contained, self-satisfying creature. You cannot have been such a child to him as he had a right to, or you would have known all—all there was to know.'

She went to the fire as she spoke and took up the poker and struck the smouldering coals into a blaze with agitated vehemence, shivering nervously, with excitement rather than cold. 'Of course that is how it is,' she said. 'You must have been thinking of your own little affairs, and not of his. He must have thought he would have his child to confide in and rely upon—and then have found out that she was not of his nature at all, nor thinking of him; and then he would shut his heart close—oh, I know him so well! that is so like Edward—and say nothing, nothing! That was always easier to him than saying a little. It was everything or nothing with him always. And when he found you took no interest, he would shut himself up. But there's Constance,' she cried after a pause—'Constance is like our side. He will be able to pour out his heart, poor Edward, to her; and she will understand him. There is some comfort in that, at least.'

If Frances had felt a momentary pleasure in giving pain, it was now repaid to her doubly. She sat where her aunt had left her, following with a quiver of consciousness everything she said. Ah, yes; she had been full of her own little affairs. She had thought of the mayonnaises, but not of any spiritual needs to which she could minister. She had not felt any wonder that a man of his gifts should live at Bordighera, or any vehemence of curiosity as to the family she belonged to, or what his antecedents were. She had taken it all quite calmly, accepting as the course of nature the absence of relations and references to home. She had known nothing else, and she had not thought of anything else. Was it her fault all through? Had she been a disappointment to her father, not worthy of him or his confidence? The tears gathered slowly in her eyes. And when Mrs. Clarendon suddenly introduced the name of Constance, Frances, too, sprang to her feet with a sense of the intolerable, which she could not master. To be told that she had failed, might be bearable; but that Constance—Constance!—should turn out to possess all that she wanted, to gain the confidence she had not been able to gain, that was more than flesh and blood could bear. She sprang up hastily, and began with trembling hands to button up to her throat the close-fitting outdoor jacket which she had undone. Mrs. Clarendon stood, her face lit up with the ruddy blaze of the fire, shooting out sharp arrows of words, with her back turned to her young victim;

while Frances behind her, in as great agitation, prepared to bring the conference and controversy to a close.

'If that is what you think,' she said, her voice tremulous with agitation and pain, pulling on her gloves with feverish haste, 'perhaps it will be better for me to go away.'

Mrs. Clarendon turned round upon her with a start of astonishment. Through the semi-darkness of that London day, which was not much more than twilight through the white curtains, the elder woman looked round upon the girl, quivering with indignation and resentment, to whom she had supposed herself entitled to say what she pleased without fear of calling forth any response of indignation. When she saw the tremor in the little figure standing against the light, the agitated movement of the hands, she was suddenly brought back to herself. It flashed across her at once that the sudden withdrawal of Frances, whom she had welcomed so warmly as her brother's favourite child, would be a triumph for Lady Markham, already no doubt very triumphant in the unveiling of her husband's hiding-place and the recovery of the child, and in the fact that Frances resembled herself, and not the father. To let that enemy understand that she, Waring's sister, could not secure the affection of Waring's child, was something which Mrs. Clarendon could not face.

'Go—where?' she said. 'You forget that you have come to spend the day with me. My lady will not expect you till the evening; and I do not suppose you can wish to expose your father's sister to her remarks.'

'My mother,' said Frances with an almost sob of emotion, 'must be more to me than my father's sister. Oh, aunt Caroline,' she cried, 'you have been very, very hard upon me. I lived as a child lives at home till Constance came. I had never known anything else. Why should I have asked questions? I did not know I had a mother. I thought it was cruel, when I first heard; and now you say it was my fault.'

'It must have been more or less your fault. A girl has no right to be so simple. You ought to have inquired; you ought to have given him no rest; you ought——'

'I will tell you,' said Frances, 'what I was brought up to do: not to trouble papa; that was all I knew from the time I was a baby. I don't know who taught me—perhaps Mariuccia, perhaps, only—everything. I was not to trouble him, whatever I did. I was never to cry, nor even to laugh too loud, nor to make a noise, nor to ask questions. Mariuccia and Domenico and every one had only this thought—not to disturb papa. He was always very kind,' she went on, softening, her eyes filling again. 'Sometimes he would be displeased about the dinner, or if his papers were disturbed. I dusted them myself, and was very careful; but sometimes that put him out. But he was very kind. He always came to the loggia in the evening, except when he was busy. He used to tell me when my perspective was wrong, and laugh at me, but not to hurt. I think you are mistaken, aunt Caroline, about papa.'

Mrs. Clarendon had come a little nearer, and turned her face towards the girl, who stood thus pleading her own cause. Neither of them was quick enough in intelligence to see distinctly the difference of the two pictures which they set before each other—the sister displaying her ideal of a delicate soul wounded and shrinking from the world, finding refuge in the tenderness of his child; the daughter making her simple representation of the father she knew, a man not at all dependent on her tenderness, concerned about the material circumstances of life, about his dinner, and that his papers should not be disturbed—kind, indeed, but in the easy indifferent way of a father who is scarcely aware that his little girl is blooming into a woman. They were not clever enough to perceive this; and yet they felt the difference with a vague sense that both views, yet neither, were quite true, and that there might be more to say on either side. Frances got choked with tears as she went on, which perhaps was the thing above all others which melted her aunt's heart. Mrs. Clarendon gave the girl credit for a passionate regret and longing for the father she loved; whereas Frances in reality was thinking, not so much of her father, as of the serene childish life which was over for ever, which never could come back again, with all its sacred ignorances, its simple unities, the absence of all complication or perplexity. Already she was so much older, and had acquired so much confusing painful knowledge—that knowledge of good and evil, and sense of another meaning lurking behind the simplest seeming fact and utterance, which, when once it has entered into the mind, is so hard to drive out again.

'Perhaps it was not your fault,' said Mrs. Clarendon at last. 'Perhaps he had been so used to you as a child, that he did not remember you were grown up. We will say no more about it, Frances. We may be sure he had his reasons. And you say he was busy sometimes. Was he writing? What was he doing? You don't know what hopes we used to have, and the great things we thought he was going to do. He was so clever; at school and at college, there was nobody like him. We were so proud of him! He might have been Lord Chancellor. Charles even says so, and he is not partial, like me; he might have been anything, if he had but tried. But all the spirit was taken out of him when he married. Oh, many a man has been the same. Women have a greal deal to answer for. I am not saying anything about your mother. You are quite right when you say that is not a subject to be discussed with you. Come downstairs; luncheon is ready; and after that we will go out. We must not quarrel, Frances. We are each other's nearest relations, when all is said.'

'I don't want to quarrel, aunt Caroline. Oh no; I never quarrelled with any one. And then you remind me of papa.'

'That is the nicest thing you have said. You can come to me, my dear, whenever you want to talk about him, to ease your heart. You can't do that with your mother; but you will never tire me. You may tell me about him from morning to night, and I shall never be tired. Mariuccia and Domenico are the servants, I suppose? and they adore him? He was always adored by the servants. He never gave any trouble, never spoke crossly. Oh, how thankful I am to be able to speak of him quite freely! I was his favourite sister. He was just the same in outward manner to us both,—he would not let Minnie see he had any preference; but he liked me the best, all the same.'

It was very grateful to Frances that this monologue should go on: it spared her the necessity of answering many questions which would have been very difficult to her; for she was not prepared to say that the servants, though faithful, adored her father, or that he never gave any trouble. Her recollection of him was that he gave a great deal of trouble, and was 'very particular.' But Mrs. Clarendon had a happy way of giving herself the information she wanted, and evidently preferred to tell Frances a thousand things, instead of being told by her. And in other ways she was very kind, insisting that Frances should eat at lunch, that she should be wrapped up well when they went out in the victoria, that she should say whether there was any shopping she wanted to do. 'I know my lady will look after your finery,' she said,—'that will be for her own credit, and help to get you off the sooner; but I hope you have plenty of nice underclothing and wraps. She is not so sure to think of these.'

Frances, to save herself from this questioning, described the numberless unnecessaries which had been already bestowed upon her, not forgetting the turquoises and other ornaments, which, she remembered with a quick sensation of shame, her mother had told her not to speak of, lest her aunt's liberalities should be checked. The result, however, was quite different. Mrs. Clarendon grew red as she heard of all these acquisitions, and when they returned to Portland Place, led Frances to her own room, and opened to her admiring gaze the safe, securely fixed into the wall, where her jewels were kept. 'There are not many that can be called family jewels,' she said; 'but I've no daughter of my own, and I should not like it to be said that you had got nothing from your father's side.'

Thus it was a conflict of liberality, not a withholding of presents because she was already supplied, which Frances had to fear. She was compelled to accept with burning cheeks, and eyes weighed down with shame and reluctance, ornaments which a few weeks ago would have seemed to her good enough for a queen. Oh, what a flutter of pleasure there had been in her heart when her father gave her the little necklace of Genoese filigree, which appeared to her the most beautiful thing in the world. She slipped into her pocket the cluster of emeralds her aunt gave her, as if she had been a thief, and hid the pretty ring which was forced upon her finger, under her glove. 'Oh, they are much too fine for me. They are too good for any girl to wear. I do not want them, indeed, aunt Caroline!'

'That may be,' Mrs. Clarendon replied; 'but I want to give them to you. It shall never be said that all the good things came from her, and nothing but trumpery from me.'

Frances took home her spoils with a sense of humiliation which weighed her to the ground. Before this, however, she had made the acquaintance of Mr. Charles Clarendon, the great Q.C., who came into the cold drawing-room two minutes before dinner in irreproachable evening costume—a well-mannered, well-looking man of middle age, or a little more, who shook hands cordially with Frances, and told her he was very glad to see her. 'But dinner is a little late, isn't it?' he said to his wife. The drawing-room looked less cold by lamp-light; and Mrs. Clarendon herself, in her soft velvet evening-gown with a good deal of lace—or perhaps it was after the awakening and excitement of her quarrel with Frances—had less the air of being like the furniture, out of use. The dinner was very luxurious and dainty. Frances, as she sat between husband and wife, observing both very closely without being aware of it, decided within herself that in this particular her aunt Caroline again reminded her of papa. Mr. Clarendon was very agreeable at dinner. He gave his wife several pieces of information indeed which Frances did not understand, but in general talked about the things that were going on, the great events of the time, the news, so much of it as was interesting, with all the ease of a man of the world. And he asked Frances a few civil and indeed kindly questions about herself. 'You must take care of our east winds,' he said; 'you will find them very sharp after the Riviera.'

'I am not delicate,' she said; 'I don't think they will hurt me.'

'No, you are not delicate,' he replied, with what Frances felt to be a look of approval; 'one has only to look at you to see that. But fine elastic health like yours is a great possession, and you must take care of it.' He added with a smile, a moment after: 'We never think that when we are young; and when we are old, thinking does little good.'

'You have not much to complain of, Charles, in that respect,' said his wife, who was always rather solemn.

'Oh, nothing at all,' was his reply. And shortly after, dinner by this time being over, he gave her a significant look, to which she responded by rising from the table.

'It is time for us to go up-stairs, my dear,' she said to Frances.

And when the ladies reached the drawing-room, it had relapsed into its morning aspect, and looked as chilly and as unused as before.

'Your uncle is one of the busiest men in London,' said Mrs. Clarendon with a scarcely perceptible sigh. 'He talked of your health; but if he had not the finest health in the world, he could not do it; he never takes any rest.'

'Is he going to work now?' Frances asked with a certain awe.

'He will take a doze for half an hour; then he will have his coffee. At ten he will come up-stairs to bid me good-night; and then—I dare not say how long he will sit up after that. He can do with less sleep than any other man, I think.' She spoke in a tone that was full of pride, yet with pathos in it too.

'In that way, you cannot see very much of him,' Frances said.

'I am more pleased that my husband should be the first lawyer in England, than that he should sit in the drawing-room with me,' she answered proudly. Then, with a faint sigh: 'One has to pay for it,' she added.

The girl looked round upon the dim room with a shiver, which she did her best to conceal. Was it worth the price, she wondered? the cold dim house, the silence in it which weighed down the soul, the half-hour's talk (no more) round the table, followed by a long lonely evening. She wondered if they had been in love with each other when they were young, and perhaps moved heaven and earth for a chance hour together, and all to come to this. And there was her own father and mother, who probably had loved each other too. As she drove along to Eaton Square, warmly wrapped in the rich fur cloak which aunt Caroline had insisted on adding to her other gifts, these examples of married life gave her a curious thrill of thought, as involuntarily she turned them over in her mind. If the case of a man were so with his wife, it would be well not to marry, she said to herself, as the inquirers did so many years ago.

And then she blushed crimson, with a sensation of heat which made her throw her cloak aside, to think that she was going back to her mother, as if she had been sent out upon a raid, laden with spoils.

## CHAPTER XXVI

THERE were voices in the drawing-room as Frances ran up-stairs, which warned her that her own appearance in her morning dress would be undesirable there. She went on with a sense of relief to her own room, where she threw aside the heavy cloak, lined with fur, which her aunt had insisted on wrapping her in. It was too grave, too ample for Frances, just as the other presents she had received were too rich and valuable for her wearing. She took the emerald brooch out of her pocket in its little case, and thrust it away into her drawer, glad to be rid of it, wondering whether it would be her duty to show it, to exhibit her presents. She divined that Lady Markham would be pleased, that she would congratulate her upon having made herself agreeable to her aunt, and perhaps repeat that horrible encouragement to her to make what progress she could in the affections of the Clarendons, because they were rich and had no heirs. If, instead of saying this, Lady Markham had but said that Mrs. Clarendon was lonely, having no children, and little good of her husband's society, how different it might have been. How anxious then would Frances have been to visit and cheer her father's sister! The girl, though she was very simple, had a great deal of inalienable good sense; and she could not but wonder within herself how her mother could make so strange a mistake.

It was late before Lady Markham came up-stairs. She came in shading her candle with her hand, gliding noiselessly to her child's bedside. 'Are you not asleep, Frances? I thought you would be too tired to keep awake.'

'Oh no. I have done nothing to tire me. I thought you would not want me down-stairs, as I was not dressed.'

'I always want you,' said Lady Markham, stooping to kiss her. 'But I quite understand why you did not come. There was nobody that could have interested you. Some old friends of mine, and a man or two whom Markham brought to dine; but nothing young or pleasant. And did you have a tolerable day? Was poor Caroline a little less gray and cold? But Constance used to tell me she was only cold when I was there.'

'I don't think she was cold. She was—very kind; at least that is what she meant, I am sure,' said Frances, anxious to do her aunt justice.

Lady Markham laughed softly, with a sort of suppressed satisfaction. She was anxious that Frances should please. She had herself, at a considerable sacrifice of pride, kept up friendly relations, or at least a show of friendly relations, with her husband's sister. But notwithstanding all this, the tone in which Frances spoke was balm to her. The cloak was an evidence that the girl had succeeded; and yet she had not joined herself to the other side. This unexpected triumph gave a softness to Lady Markham's voice.

'We must remember,' she said, 'that poor Caroline is very much alone. When one is much alone, one's very voice gets rusty, so to speak. It sounds hoarse in one's throat. You may think, perhaps, that I have not much experience of that. Still, I can understand; and it takes some time to get it toned into ordinary smoothness. It is either too expressive, or else it sounds cold. A great deal of allowance is to be made for a woman who spends so much of her life alone.'

'Oh yes,' cried Frances, with a burst of tender compunction, taking her mother's soft white dimpled hand in her own, and kissing it with a fervour which meant penitence as well as enthusiasm. 'It is so good of you to remind me of that.'

'Because she has not much good to say of me? My dear, there are a great many things that you don't know, that it would be hard to explain to you: we must forgive her for that.'

And for a moment Lady Markham looked very grave, turning her face away towards the vacancy of the dark room with something that sounded like a sigh. Her daughter had never loved her so much as at this moment. She laid her cheek upon her mother's hand, and felt the full sweetness of that contact enter into her heart.

'But I am disturbing your beauty-sleep, my love,' she said; 'and I want you to look your best to-morrow; there are several people coming to-morrow. Did she give you that great cloak, Frances? How like poor Caroline! I know the cloak quite well. It is far too *old* for you. But that is beautiful sable it is trimmed with; it will make you something. She is fond of giving presents.' Lady Markham was very quick—full of the intelligence in which Mrs. Clarendon failed. She felt the instinctive loosening of her child's hands from her own, and that the girl's cheek was lifted from that tender pillow. 'But,' she said, 'we'll say no more of that to-night,' and stooped and kissed her, and drew her covering about her with all the sweetness of that care which Frances had never received before. Nevertheless, the involuntary and horrible feeling that it was clever of her mother to stop when she did and say no more, struck chill to the girl's very soul.

Next day Mr. Ramsay came in the afternoon, and immediately addressed himself to Frances. 'I hope you have not forgotten your promise, Miss Waring, to give me all the *renseignements*. I should not like to lose such a good chance.'

'I don't think I have any information to give you—if it is about Bordighera, you mean. I am fond of it; but then I have lived there all my life. Constance thought it dull.'

'Ah yes, to be sure—your sister went there. But her health was perfect. I have seen her go out in the wildest weather, in days that made me shiver. She said that to see the sun always shining bored her. She liked a great deal of excitement and variety—don't you think?' he added after a moment, in a tentative way.

'The sun does not shine always,' said Frances, piqued for the reputation of her home, as if this were an accusation. 'We have gray days sometimes, and sometimes storms, beautiful storms, when the sea is all in foam.'

He shivered a little at the idea. 'I have never yet found the perfect place in which there is nothing of all that,' he said. 'Wherever I have been, there are cold days—even in Algiers, you know. No climate is perfect. I don't go in much for society when I am at a health-place. It disturbs one's thoughts and one's temper, and keeps you from fixing your mind upon your cure, which you should always do. But I suppose you know everybody there?'

'There is—scarcely any one there,' she said, faltering, remembering at once that her father was not a person to whom to offer introductions.

'So much the better,' he said more cheerfully. 'It is a thing I have often heard doctors say, that society was quite undesirable. It disturbs one's mind. One can't be so exact about hours. In short, it places health in a secondary place, which is fatal. I am always extremely rigid on that point. Health—must go before all. Now, dear Miss Waring, to details, if you please.' He took out a little note-book, bound in russia, and drew forth a jewelled pencil-case. 'The hotels first, I beg; and then the other particulars can be filled in. We can put them under different heads: (1) Shelter; (2) Exposure; (3) Size and convenience of apartments; (4) Nearness to church, beach, etc. I hope you don't think I am asking too much?'

'I am so glad to see that you have not given him up because of Con,' said one of Lady Markham's visitors, talking very earnestly over the tea-table, with a little nod and gesture to indicate of whom she was speaking. 'He must be very fond of you, to keep coming; or he must have some hope.'

'I think he is rather fond of me, poor Claude!' Lady Markham replied without looking round. 'I am one of the oldest friends he has.'

'But Constance, you know, gave him a terrible snub. I should not have wondered if he had never entered the house again.'

'He enters the house almost every day; and will continue to do so, I hope. Poor boy, he cannot afford to throw away his friends.'

'Then that is almost the only luxury he can't afford.'

Lady Markham smiled upon this remark. 'Claude,' she said, turning round, 'don't you want some tea? Come and get it while it is hot.'

'I am getting some *renseignements* from Miss Waring. It is very good of her. She is telling me all about Bordighera, which, so far as I can see, will be a very nice place for the winter,' said Ramsay, coming up to the tea-table with his little note-book in his hand. 'Thanks, dear Lady Markham. A little sugar, please. Sugar is extremely nourishing, and it is a great pity to leave it out in diet—except, you know, when you are inclining to fat. Banting is at the bottom of all this fashion of doing without sugar. It is not good for little thin fellows like me.'

'I gave it up long before I ever heard of Banting,' said the stout lady: for it need scarcely be said that there was a stout lady; no tea-party in England ever assembled without one. The individual in the present case was young, and rebellious against the fate which had overtaken her—not of the soft, smiling, and contented kind.

'It does us real good,' said Claude, with his softly pathetic voice. 'I have seen one or two very sad instances where the fat did not go away, you know, but got limp and flaccid, and the last state of that man was worse than the first. Dear lady, I think you should be very cautious. To make experiments with one's health is really criminal. We are getting on very nicely with the *renseignements*. Miss Waring has remembered a great deal. She thought she could not tell me anything; but she has remembered a great deal.'

'Bordighera? Is that where Constance is?' the ladies said to each other round the low tea-table where Lady Markham was so busy. She smiled upon them all, and answered 'Yes,' without any tinge of the embarrassment which perhaps they hoped to see.

'But of course as a resident she is not living among the people at the hotels. You know how the people who live in a place hold themselves apart; and the season is almost over. I don't think that either tourists or invalids passing that way are likely to see very much of Con.'

In the meantime, Frances, as young Ramsay had said, had been honestly straining her mind to 'remember' what she could about the Marina and the circumstances there. She did not know anything about the east wind, and had no recollection of how it affected the place. She remembered that the sun shone in at the windows all day; which of course meant, as he informed her, a southern exposure; and that in all the hotel gardens, as well as elsewhere, there were palms growing, and hedges of lemons and orange trees; and that at the Angleterre—or was it the Victoria?—the housekeeper was English; along with other details of a similar kind. There were no balls; very few concerts or entertainments of any kind; no afternoon tea-parties. 'How could there be?' said Frances, 'when there were only ourselves, the Gaunts, and the Durants.'

'Only themselves, the Gaunts, and the Durants,' Ramsay wrote down in his little book. 'How delightful that must be!

Thank you so much, Miss Waring. Usually one has to pay for one's experience; but thanks to you, I feel that I know all about it. It seems a place in which one could do one's self every justice. I shall speak to Dr. Lull about it at once. I have no doubt he will think it the very place for me.'

'You will find it dull,' said Frances, looking at him curiously, wondering was it possible that he could be sincere, or whether this was his way of justifying to himself his intention of following Constance. But nothing could be more steadily matter-of-fact than the young man's aspect.

'Yes, no doubt I shall find it dull. I don't so very much object to that. At Cannes and those places there is a continual racket going on. One might almost as well be in London. One is seduced into going out in the evening, doing all sorts of things. I think your place is an ideal place—plenty of sunshine and no amusements. How can I thank you enough, Miss Waring, for your *renseignements?* I shall speak to Dr. Lull without delay.'

'But you must recollect that it will soon be getting very hot; and even the people who live there will be going away. Mr. Durant sometimes takes the duty at Homburg or one of those places; and the Gaunts come home to England; and even we——'

Here Frances paused for a moment to watch him, and she thought that the pencil with which he was still writing down all these precious details, paused too. He looked up at her, as if waiting for further information. 'Yes?' he said interrogatively.

'Even we—go up among the mountains where it is cooler,' she said.

He looked a little thoughtful at this; but presently threw her back into perplexity by saying calmly: 'That would not matter to me so much, since I am quite sincere in thinking that when one goes to a health-place, one should give one's self up to one's health. But unfortunately, or perhaps I should say fortunately, Miss Waring, England is just as good as anywhere else in the summer; and Dr. Lull has not thought it necessary this year to send me away. But I feel quite set up with your *renseignements*,' he added, putting back his book into his pocket, 'and I certainly shall think of it for another year.'

Frances had been so singled out for the purpose of giving the young invalid information, that she found herself a little apart from the party when he went away. They were all ladies, and all intimates, and the unaccustomed girl was not prepared for the onslaught of this curious and eager, though so pretty and fashionable mob. 'What are those *renseignements* you have been giving him? Is he going off after Con? Has he been questioning you about Con? We are all dying to know. And what do you think she will say to him if he goes out after her?' cried all, speaking together, those soft eager voices, to which Frances did not know how to reply.

## CHAPTER XXVII

FRANCES became accustomed to the presence of young Ramsay after this. He appeared almost every day, very often in the afternoon, eager for tea, and always disposed to inquire for further *renseignements*, though he was quite certain that he was not to leave England till autumn at the earliest. She began to regard him as a younger brother, or cousin at the least—a perfectly harmless individual, with whom she could talk when he wanted her with a gentle complacence, without any reference to her own pleasure. As a matter of fact, it did not give her any pleasure to talk to Claude. She was kind to him for his sake; but she had no desire for his presence on her own account. It surprised her that he ever could have been thought of as a possible mate for Constance. Constance was so much cleverer, so much more advanced in every way than herself, that to suppose she could put up with what Frances found so little attractive, was a constant amazement to the girl. She could not but express this on one of the occasions, not so very frequent as she had expected, on which her mother and she were alone together.

'Is it really true,' she said at the end of a long silence, 'that there was a question of a—marriage between Constance and Mr. Ramsay?'

'It is really quite true,' said her mother with a smile. 'And why not? Do you disapprove?'

'It is not that I disapprove—I have no right to disapprove; it is only that it seems so impossible.'

'Why? I see nothing impossible in it. He is of suitable age; he is handsome. You cannot deny that he is handsome, however much you may dislike him, my dear.'

'But I don't dislike him at all; I like him very much—in a kind of way.'

'You have every appearance of doing so,' said Lady Markham with meaning. 'You talk to him more, I think, than to any one else.'

'That is because——'

'Oh, I don't ask any reason, Frances. If you like his society that is reason enough—the best of reasons. And evidently he likes you. He would, no doubt, be more suitable to you than to Constance.'

'Mamma! I don't know what you mean.' Frances woke up suddenly from her musing state, and looked at her mother with wide open startled eyes.

'I don't mean anything. I only ask you to point out wherein his unsuitability lies. Young, handsome, *nice*, and very rich. What could a girl desire more? You think, perhaps, as you have been so simply brought up, that a heroine like Con should have had a Duke or an Earl at the least. But people think less of the importance of titles as they know Society better. Claude is of an excellent old family—better than many peers. She would have been a very fortunate young woman with such an establishment; but she has taken her own way. I hope you will never be so hot-headed as your sister, Frances. You look much more practical and reasonable. You will not, I think, dart off at a tangent without warning or thought.'

Frances looked her mother doubtfully in the face. Her feelings fluctuated strangely in respect to this central figure in the new world round her. To make acquaintance with your parents for the first time when you have reached the critical age, and are no longer able to accept everything with the matter-of-fact serenity of a child, is a curious experience. Children, indeed, are tremendous critics, at the tribunal of whose judgment we all stand unawares, and have our just place allotted to us, with an equity which happily leads to no practical conclusions, but which no tribunal on earth can equal for clear sight and remorseless decision. Eighteen is not quite so abstract as eight; yet the absence of familiarity, and that love which is instinctive, and happily quite above all decisions of the judgment, makes, in such an extraordinary case as that of Frances, the sudden call upon the critical faculties, the consciousness that accompanies their exercise, and the underlying sense, never absent, that all this is unnatural and wrong, into a complication full of distress and uncertainty. A vague question whether it were possible that such a conflict as that which had ended in Constance's flight, should ever arise between Lady Markham and herself, passed through the mind of Frances. If it should do so, the expedient which had been open to Constance would be to herself impossible. All pride and delicacy of feeling, all sense of natural justice, would prevent her from adopting that course. The question would have to be worked out between her mother and herself, should it ever occur. Was it possible that it could ever occur? She looked at Lady Markham, who had returned to her usual morning occupation of writing letters, with a questioning gaze. There had been a pause, and Lady Markham had waited for a moment for a reply. Then she had taken up her pen again, and with a smiling nod had returned to her correspondence.

Frances sat and pondered with her face turned towards the writing-table, at which her mother spent so much of her time. The number of letters that were written there every morning filled her with amazement. Waring had written no letters, and received only one now and then, which Frances understood to be about business. She had looked very respectfully at first on the sheaves which were every day taken away, duly stamped, from that well-worn but much decorated writing-table. When it had been suggested to her that she too must have letters to write, she had dutifully compiled her little bulletin for her father, putting aside as quite a different matter the full chronicle of her proceedings, written at a great many *reprises*, to Mariuccia, which somehow did not seem at all to come under the same description. It had, however, begun to become apparent to Frances, unwillingly, as she made acquaintance with everything about her, that Lady Markham's correspondence was really by no means of the importance which appeared at the first glance. It seemed to consist generally in the conveyance of little bits of news, of little engagements, of the echoes of what people said and did; and it was replied to by endless shoals of little notes on every variety of tinted, gilt, and perfumed paper, with every kind of monogram, crest, and device, and every new idea in shape and form which the genius of the fashionable stationer could work out. 'I have just heard from Lady So-and-so the funniest story,' Lady Markham would say to her son, repeating the anecdote—which on many occasions Frances, listening, did not see the point of. But then both mother and son were cleverer people than she was. 'I must write and let Mary St. Serle and Louisa Avenel know—it will amuse them so;' and there was at once an addition of two letters to the budget. Frances did not think—all under her breath, as it were, in involuntary unexpressed comment—that the tale was worth a pretty sheet of paper, a pretty envelope—both decorated with Lady Markham's cipher and coronet—and a penny stamp. But so it was; and this was one of the principal occupations evidently of a great lady's life. Lady Markham considered it very grave, and 'a duty.' She allowed nothing to interfere with her correspondence. 'I have my letters to write,' she said, as who should say, 'I have my day's work to do.' By degrees Frances lost her respect for this day's work, and would watch the manufactory of one note after another with eyes that were unwillingly cynical, wondering within herself whether it would make any difference to the world if pen and ink were forbidden in that house. Markham, too, spoke of writing his letters as a valid reason for much consumption of time. But then, no doubt, Markham had land agents to write to, and lawyers, and other necessary people. In this, Frances did not do justice to her mother, who also had business letters to write, and did a great deal in stocks, and kept her eyes on the money market. The girl sat and watched her with a sort of fascination as her pen ran lightly over sheet after sheet. Sometimes Lady Markham was full of tenderness and generosity, and had the look of understanding everybody's feelings. She was never unkind. She never took a bad view of any one, or suggested evil or interested motives, as even Frances perceived, in her limited experience, so many people to do. But, on the other hand, there would come into her face sometimes a look—which seemed to say that she might be inexorable, if once she had made up her mind: a look before which it seemed to Frances that flight like that of Constance would be the easiest way. Frances was not sufficiently instructed in human nature to know that anomalies of this kind are common enough; and that nobody is always and in all matters good, any more than anybody is in all things ill. It troubled her to perceive the junction of these different qualities in her mother; and still more it troubled her to think what, in case of coming to some point of conflict, she should do? How would she get out of it? Would it be only by succumbing wholly, or had she the courage in her to fight it out?

'Little un,' said Markham, coming up to her suddenly, 'why do you look at the mother so? Are you measuring yourself against her, to see how things would stand if it came to a fight?'

'Markham!' Frances started with a great blush of guilt. 'I did not know you were here. I—never heard you come in.'

'You were so lost in thought. I have been here these five minutes, waiting for an opportunity to put in a word. Don't you know I'm a thought-reader, like those fellows that find pins? Take my advice, Fan, and never let it come to a fight.'

'I don't know how to fight,' she said, crimsoning more and more; 'and besides, I was not thinking—there is nothing to fight about.'

'Fibs, these last,' he said. 'Come out and take a little walk with me,—you are looking pale; and I will tell you a thing or two. Mother, I am going to take her out for a walk; she wants air.'

'Do, dear,' said Lady Markham, turning half round with a smile. 'After luncheon, she is going out with me; but in the meantime, you could not do better—get a little of the morning into her face, while I finish my letters.' She turned again with a soft smile on her face to send off that piece of information to Louisa Avenel and Mary St. Serle, closing an envelope as she spoke, writing the address with such a preoccupied yet amiable air—a woman who, but for having so much to do, would have had no thought or ambition beyond her home. Markham waited till Frances appeared in the trim little walking-dress which the mother had paid her the high compliment of making no change in. They turned their faces as usual towards the Park, where already, though Easter was very near, there was a flutter of fine company in preparation for the more serious glories of the Row, after the season had fairly set in.

'Little Fan, you mustn't fight,' were the first words that Markham said.

She felt her heart begin to beat loud. 'Markham! there is nothing to fight about—oh, nothing. What put fighting in your head?'

'Never mind. It is my duty to instruct your youth; and I think I see troubles brewing. Don't be so kind to that little beggar Claude. He is a selfish little beggar, though he looks so smooth; and since Constance won't have him, he will soon begin to think he may as well have you.'

'Markham!' Frances felt herself choking with horror and shame.

'You have got my name quite pat, my dear; but that is neither here nor there. Markham has nothing to do with it, except to put you on your guard. Don't you know, you little innocent, what is the first duty of a mother? Then I can tell you: to marry her daughters well; brilliantly, if possible, but at all events *well*—or anyhow to marry them; or else she is a failure, and all the birds of her set come round her and peck her to death.'

'I often don't understand your jokes,' said Frances, with a little dignity, 'and I suppose this is a joke.'

'And you think it is a joke in doubtful taste? So should I, if I meant it that way, but I don't. Listen, Fan; I am much of that opinion myself.'

'That a mother—that a lady——? You are always saying horrible things.'

'It is true, though—if it is best that a girl should marry—mind you, I only say if—then it *is* her mother's duty. You can't look out for yourself—at least I am very glad you are not of the kind that do, my little Fan.'

'Markham,' said Frances, with a dignity which seemed to raise her small person a foot at least, 'I have never heard such things talked about; and I don't wish to hear anything more, please. In books,' she added, after a moment's interval, 'it is the gentlemen——'

'Who look out? But that is all changed, my dear. Fellows fall in love—which is quite different—and generally fall in love with the wrong person; but you see I was not supposing that you were likely to do anything so wild as that.'

'I hope not,' cried Frances hurriedly. 'However,' she added, after another pause, colouring deeply, but yet looking at him with a certain courageous air, 'if there was any question about being—married, which of course there is not—I never heard that there was any other way.'

'Brava, Fan! Come, now, here is the little thing's own opinion, which is worth a great deal. It would not matter, then, who the man was, so long as *that* happened, eh? Let us know the premises on either side.'

'You are a great deal older than I am, Markham,' said Frances.

'Granted, my dear—a great deal. And what then? I should be wiser, you mean to say? But so I am, Fan.'

'It was not *that* I meant. I mean, it is you who ought—to marry. You are a man. You are the eldest, the chief one of your family. I have always read in books——'

Markham put up his hand as a shield. He stopped to laugh, repeating over and over again that one note of mirth with which it was his wont to express his feelings. 'Brava, Fan!' he repeated when he could speak. 'You are a little Trojan. This is something like carrying the war into the enemy's country.' He was so much tickled by the assault, that the water stood in his eyes. 'What a good thing we are not in the Row, where I should have been delivered over to the talk of the town. Frances, my little dear, you are the funniest of little philosophers.'

'Where is the fun?' said Frances gravely. 'And I am not a philosopher, Markham; I am only—your sister.'

At this the little man became serious all at once, and took her hand and drew it within his arm. They were walking up Constitution Hill, where there are not many spectators. 'Yes, my dear' he said, 'and as nice a little sister as a man could desire;' and walked on, holding her arm close to him with an expressive clasp which spoke more than words. The touch of nature and the little suggestive proffer of affection and kindred which was in the girl's words, touched his heart. He said nothing till they were about emerging upon the noise and clamour of the world at the great thoroughfare which they had to cross. Then 'After all,' he said, 'yours is a very natural proposition, Fan. It is I who ought to marry. Many people would say it is my duty; and perhaps I might have been of that opinion once. But I've a great deal on my conscience, dear. You think I'm rather a good little man, don't you? fond of ladies' society, and of my mother and little sister, which is such a good feature, everybody says? Well, but that's a mistake, my dear. I don't know that I am at all a fit person to be walking about London streets and into the Park with an innocent little creature, such as you are, under my arm.'

'Markham!' she cried, with a tone which was half astonished, half indignant, and her arm thrilled within his—not, perhaps, with any intention of withdrawing itself; but that was what he thought.

'Wait,' he said, 'till I have got you safely across the Corner—there is always a crowd—and then, if you are frightened, and prefer another chaperon, we'll find one, you may be sure, before we have gone a dozen steps. Come now; there is a little lull. Be plucky, and keep your head, Fan.'

'I want no other chaperon, Markham; I like you.'

'Do you, my dear? Well, you can't think what a pleasure that is to me, Fan. You wouldn't probably, if you knew me better. However, you must stick to that opinion as long as you can. Who, do you think, would marry me if I were to try? An ugly little fellow, not very well off, with several very bad tendencies, and—a mother.'

'A mother, Markham!'

'Yes, my dear; to whom he is devoted—who must always be the first to him. That's a beautiful sentiment, don't you think? But wives have a way of not liking it. I could not force her to call herself the Dowager, could I, Fan? She is a pretty woman yet. She is really younger than I am. She would not like it.'

'I think you are only making fun of me, Markham. I don't know what you mean. What could mamma have to do with it? If she so much wanted Constance to marry, surely she must want you still more, for you are so much older; and then——'

'There is no want of arguments,' he said with a laugh, shaking his head. 'Conviction is what is wanted. There might have been times when I should have much relished your advice; but nobody would have had me, fortunately. No; I must not give up the mother, my dear. Don't you know I was the cause of all the mischief—at least of a great part of the mischief—when your father went away? And now, I must make a mess of it again, and put folly into Con's head. The mother is an angel, Fan, or she would not trust you with me.'

It flashed across Frances' memory that Constance had warned her not to let herself fall into Markham's hands; but this only bewildered the girl in the softening of her heart to him, and in the general bewilderment into which she was thus thrown back. 'I do not believe you can be bad,' she said earnestly; 'you must be doing yourself injustice.'

By this time they were in the Row in all the brightness of the crowd, which, if less great than at a later period, was more friendly. Markham had begun to pull off his hat to every third lady he met, to put out his hand right and left, to distribute nods and greetings. 'We'll resume the subject some time or other,' he said with a smile aside to Frances, disengaging her arm from his. The girl felt as if she had suddenly lost her anchorage, and was thrown adrift upon this sea of strange faces; and thrown at the same time back into a moral chaos, full of new difficulties and wonders, out of which she could not see her way.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

A DAY or two after, they all went to the Priory for Easter.

The Priory was in the Isle of Wight, and it was Markham's house. It was not a very great house, nor was it medieval and mysterious, as an unsophisticated imagination naturally expected. Its name came, it was said (or hoped), from an old ecclesiastical establishment once planted there; but the house itself was a sort of Strawberry-Hill Gothic, with a good deal of plaster and imitated ornament of the perpendicular kind,—that is to say, the worst of its kind, which is, unfortunately, that which most attracts the imitator. It stood on a slope above the beach, where the vegetation was soft and abundant, recalling more or less to the mind of Frances the aspect of the country with which she was best acquainted—the great bosquets of glistering green laurel and laurestine simulating the daphnes and orange-trees, and the gray downs above recalling in some degree the scattered hill-tops above the level of the olives; though the great rollers of the Atlantic which thundered in upon the beach were not like that rippling blue which edged the Riviera in so many rims of delicate colour. The differences, however, struck Frances less than the resemblance, for which she had scarcely been prepared, and which gave her a great deal of surprised pleasure at the first glance. This put temporarily out of her mind all the new and troublesome thoughts which her conversation with Markham had called forth, and which had renewed her curiosity about her step-brother, whom she had begun to receive into the landscape around her with the calm of habit and without asking any questions. Was he really bad, or rather, not good?—which was as far as Frances could go. Had he really been the cause, or partly the cause, of the separation between her father and mother? She was bewildered by these little breaks in the curtain which concealed the past from her so completely—that past which was so well known to the others around, which an invincible delicacy prevented her from speaking of or asking questions about. All went on so calmly around her, as if nothing out of the ordinary routine had ever been; and yet she was aware not only that much had been, but that it remained so distinctly in the minds of those smiling people as to influence their conduct and form their motives still. Though it was Markham's house, it was his mother who was the uncontested sovereign, not less, probably more, than if the real owner had been her husband instead of her son. And even Frances, little as she was acquainted with the world, was aware that this was seldom the case. And why should not Markham at his age, which to her seemed at least ten years more than it was, be married, when it was already thought important that Constance should marry? These were very bewildering questions, and the moment to resume the subject never seemed to come.

There was a party in the house, which included Claude Ramsay, and Sir Thomas, the elder person in whom Lady Markham had thought there could be nothing particularly interesting. He was a very frequent member of the family party, all the same; and now that they were living under the same roof, Frances did not find him without interest. There was also a lady with two daughters, whose appearance was very interesting to the girl. They reminded her a little of Constance, and of the difficulty she had found in finding subjects on which to converse with her sister. The Miss Montagues knew a great many people, and talked of them continually; but Frances knew nobody. She listened with interest, but she could add nothing either to their speculations or recollections. She did not know anything about the contrivances which brought about the marriage between Cecil Gray and Emma White. She was utterly incompetent even to hazard an opinion as to what Lady Milbrook would do *now;* and she did not even understand about the hospitals which they visited and 'took an interest' in. She tried very hard to get some little current with which she could make herself acquainted in the river of their talk; but nothing could be more difficult. Even when she brought out her sketch-book and opened ground upon that subject—about which the poor little girl modestly believed she knew by experience a very little—she was silenced in five minutes by their scientific acquaintance with washes, and glazing, and body colour, and the laws of composition. Frances did not know how to compose a picture. She said: 'Oh no; I do not make it up in my head at all; I only do what I see.'

'You mean you don't formulate rules,' said Maud. 'Of course you don't mean that you merely imitate, for that is tea-board style; and your drawings are quite pretty. I like that little bit of the coast.'

'How well one knows the Riviera,' said Ethel; 'everybody who goes there has something to show. But I am rather surprised you don't keep to one style. You seem to do a little of everything. Don't you feel that flower-painting rather spoils your hand for the larger effects?'

'It wants such a very different distribution of light and shade,' said the other sister. 'You have to calculate your tones on such a different scale. If you were working at South Kensington or any other of the good schools——'

'I should not advise her to do that—should you, Maud?—there is such a long elementary course. But I suppose you did your freehand, and all that, in the schoolroom?'

Frances did not know how to reply. She put away her little sketch with a sense of extreme humiliation. 'Oh, I am afraid I am not fit to talk about it at all,' she said. 'I don't even know what words to use. It has been all imitation, as you say.'

The two young ladies smiled upon her, and reassured her. 'You must not be discouraged. I am sure you have talent. It only wants a little hard work to master the principles; and then you go on so much easier afterwards,' they said. It puzzled Frances much that they did not produce their own sketches, which she thought would have been as good as a lesson to her; and it was not till long after that it dawned upon her that in this particular Maud and Ethel were defective. They knew how to do it, but could not do it; whereas she could do it without knowing how.

'How is it, I wonder, said one of them, changing the subject after a little polite pause, which suggested fatigue, 'that Mrs. Winterbourn is not here this year?'

They looked at her for this information, to the consternation of Frances, who did not know how to reply. 'You know I have not been long—here,' she said: she had intended to say at home, but the effort was beyond her—'and I don't even know who Mrs. Winterbourn is.'

'Oh!' they both cried; and then for a minute there was nothing more. 'You may think it strange of us to speak of it,' said Maud at length; 'only, it always seemed so well understood; and we have always met her here.'

'Oh, she goes everywhere,' cried Ethel. 'There never was a word breathed against—— Please don't think *that*, from anything we have said.'

'On the contrary, mamma always says it is *so* wise of Lady

Markham,' said Maud; 'so much better that he should always meet her here.'

Frances retired into herself with a confusion which she did not know how to account for. She did not in the least know what they meant, and yet she felt the colour rise in her cheek. She blushed for she knew not what; so that Maud and Ethel said to each other, afterwards: 'She is a little hypocrite. She knew just as well as either you or I.'

Frances, however, did not know; and here was another subject about which she could not ask information. She carried away her sketch-book to her room with a curious feeling of ignorance and foolishness. She did not know anything at all—neither about her own surroundings, nor about the little art which she was so fond of, in which she had taken just a little pride, as well as so much pleasure. She put the sketches away with a few hasty tears, feeling troubled and provoked, and as if she could never look at them with any satisfaction, or attempt to touch a pencil again. She had never thought they were anything great; but to be made to feel so foolish in her own little way was hard. Nor was this the only trial to which she was exposed. After dinner, retiring, which she did with a sense of irritation which her conscience condemned, from the neighbourhood of Ethel and Maud, she fell into the hands of Sir Thomas, who also had a way of keeping very clear of these young ladies. He came to where Frances was standing in a corner, almost out of sight. She had drawn aside one edge of the curtain, and was looking out upon the shrubbery and the lawn, which stood out against the clear background of the sea—with a great deal of wistfulness, and perhaps a secret tear or two in her eyes. Here she was startled by a sudden voice in her ear. 'You are looking out on the moonlight,' Sir Thomas said. It took her a moment before she could swallow the sob in her throat.

'It is very bright; it is a little like—home.' This word escaped her in the confusion of her thoughts.

'You mean the Riviera. Did you like it so much? I should have thought—— But no doubt, whatever the country is which we call home, it seems desirable to us.'

'Oh, but you can't know how beautiful it is,' cried Frances, roused from her fit of despondency. 'Perhaps you have never been there?'

'Oh yes, often. Does your father like it as well as you do, Miss Waring? I should have supposed, for a man——'

'Yes,' said Frances, 'I know what you mean. They say there is nothing to do. But my father is not a man to want to do anything. He is fond of books; he reads all day long, and then comes out into the loggia with his cigarette—and talks to me.'

'That sounds very pleasant,' said Sir Thomas with a smile, taking no notice of the involuntary quaver that had got into the girl's voice. 'But I wonder if perhaps he does not want a little variety, a little excitement? Excuse me for saying so. Men, you know, are not always so easily contented as the better half of creation; and then they are accustomed to larger duties, to more action, to public affairs.'

'I don't think papa takes much interest in all that,' said Frances with an air of authority. 'He has never cared for what was going on. The newspapers he sometimes will not open.'

'That is a great change. He used to be a hot politician in the old days.'

'Did you know my father?' she cried, turning upon him with a glow of sudden interest.

'I knew him very well—better than most people. I was one of those who felt the deepest regret——'

She stood gazing at him with her face lifted to him with so profound an interest and desire to know, that he stopped short, startled by the intensity of her look. 'Miss Waring,' he said, 'it is a very delicate subject to talk to their child upon.'

'Oh, I know it is. I don't like to ask—and yet it seems as if I ought to know.' Frances was seized with one of those sudden impulses of confidence which sometimes make the young so indiscreet. If she had known Sir Thomas intimately, it would not have occurred to her; but as a stranger, he seemed safe. 'No one has ever told me,' she added in the heat of this sudden overflow, 'neither how it was or why it was—except Markham, who says it was his fault.'

'There were faults on all sides, I think,' said Sir Thomas. 'There always are in such cases. No one person is able to carry out such a prodigious mistake. You must pardon me if I speak plainly. You are the only person whom I can ask about my old friend.'

'Oh, I like you to speak plainly,' cried Frances. 'Talk to me about him; ask me anything you please.' The tears came into her voice, and she put her hands together instinctively. She had been feeling very lonely and home-sick, and out of accord with all her surroundings. To return even in thought to the old life and its associations brought a flood of bitter sweetness to her heart.

'I can see at least,' said Sir Thomas,' that he has secured a most loving champion in his child.'

This arrested her enthusiasm in a moment. She was too sincere to accept such a solution of her own complicated feelings. Was she the loving champion which she was so suddenly assumed to be? She became vaguely aware that the things which had rushed back upon her mind and filled her with longing were not the excellences of her father, but rather the old peace and ease and ignorance of her youthful life, which nothing could now restore. She could not respond to the confidence of her father's friend. He had kept her in ignorance; he had deceived her; he had not made any attempt to clear the perplexities of her difficult path, but left her to find out everything, more perhaps than she yet knew. Sir Thomas was a little surprised that she made him no reply; but he set it down to emotion and agitation, which might well take from so young and innocent a girl the possibility of reply.

'I don't know whether I am justified in the hope I have been entertaining ever since you came,' he said. 'It is very hard that your father should be banished from his own country and all his duties by—what was, after all, never a very important cause. There has been no unpardonable wrong on either side. He is terribly sensitive, you know. And Lady Markham —she is a dear friend of mine; I have a great affection for her——'

'If you please,' said Frances quickly, 'it is not possible for me to listen to any discussion of mamma.'

'My dear Miss Waring,' he cried, 'this is better and better. You are then a partisan on both sides?'

Poor little Frances felt as if she were at least hemmed in on both sides, and without any way of escape. She looked up in his face with an appeal which he did not understand, for how was it possible to suppose that she did not know all about a matter which had affected her whole life?

'Don't you think,' said Sir Thomas, drawing very close to her, stooping over her, 'that if we two were to lay our heads together, we might bring things to a better understanding? Constance, to whom I have often spoken on the subject, knew only one side—and that not the difficult side. Markham was mixed up in it all, and could never be impartial. But you know both, and your father best. I am sure you are full of sense, as Waring's daughter ought to be.. Don't you think——'

He had taken both Frances' hands in his enthusiasm, and pressed so closely upon her that she had to retreat a step, almost with alarm. And he had his back to the light, shutting her out from all succour, as she thought. It was all the girl could do to keep from crying out that she knew nothing,—that she was more ignorant than any one; and when there suddenly came from behind Sir Thomas the sound of many voices, without agitation or special meaning, her heart gave a bound of relief, as if she had escaped. He gave her hands a vehement pressure and let them drop; and then Claude Ramsay's voice of gentle pathos came in. 'Are you not afraid, Miss Waring, of the draught? There must be some door or window open. It is enough to blow one away.'

'You look like a couple of conspirators,' said Markham. 'Fan, your little eyes are blinking like an owl's. Come back, my dear, into the light.'

'No,' said Claude; 'the light here is perfect. I never can understand why people should want so much light only to talk by. Will you sit here, Miss Waring? Here is a corner out of the draught. I want to say something more about Bordighera—one other little *renseignement*, and then I shall not require to trouble you any more.'

Frances looked at Markham for help, but he did not interfere. He looked a little grave, she thought; but he took Sir Thomas by the arm, and presently led him away. She was too shy to refuse on her own account Claude's demand, and sat down reluctantly on the sofa, where he placed himself at her side.

'Your sister,' he said, 'never had much sympathy with me about draughts. She used to think it ridiculous to take so much care. But my doctrine always is, take care beforehand, and then you don't need to trouble yourself after. Don't you think I am right?'

She understood very well how Constance would receive his little speeches. In the agitation in which she was, gleams of perception coming through the chaos, sudden visions of Constance, who had been swept out of her mind by the progress of events, and of her father, whom her late companion had been talking about—as if it would be so easy to induce him to change all his ways, and do what other people wished!—came back to her mind. They seemed to stand before her there, both appearing out of the mists, both so completely aware of what they wanted to do—so little likely to be persuaded into some one else's mode of thought.

'I think Constance and you were not at all likely to think the same,' she said.

Ramsay looked at her with a glance which for him was hasty and almost excited. 'No?' he said in an interrogative tone. 'What makes you think so? Perhaps when one comes to consider, you are right. She was always so well and strong. You and I, perhaps, do you think, are more alike?'

'No,' said Frances, very decidedly. 'I am much stronger than Constance. She might have some patience with—with—what was fanciful; but I should have none.'

'With what was fanciful? Then you think I am fanciful?' said Claude, raising himself up from his feeble attitude. He laughed a little, quite undisturbed in temper by this reproach. 'I wish other people thought so; I wish they would let me stay comfortably at home, and do what everybody does. But, Miss Waring, you are not so sympathetic as I thought.'

'I am afraid I am not sympathetic,' said Frances, feeling much ashamed of herself. 'Oh, Mr. Ramsay, forgive me; I did not mean to say anything so disagreeable.'

'Never mind,' said Claude. 'When people don't know me, they often think so. I am sorry, because I thought perhaps you and I might agree better. But very likely it was a mistake. Are you feeling the draught again? It is astonishing how a draught will creep round, when you think you are quite out of the way of it. If you feel it, you must not run the risk of a cold, out of consideration for me.'

## CHAPTER XXIX

'SHE thinks I am fanciful,' he said.

He was sitting with Lady Markham in the room which was her special sanctuary. She did not call it her boudoir—she was not at all inclined to *bouder;* but it answered to that retirement in common parlance. Those who wanted to see her alone, to confide in her, as many people did, knocked at the door of this room. It opened with a large window upon the lawn, and looked down through a carefully-kept opening upon the sea. Amid all the little luxuries appropriate to my lady's chamber, you could see the biggest ships in the world pass across the gleaming foreground, shut in between two *massifs* of laurel, making a delightful confusion of the great and the small, which was specially pleasant to her. She sat, however, with her back to this pleasant prospect, holding up a screen, to shade her delicate cheek from the bright little fire, which, though April was far advanced, was still thought necessary so near the sea. Claude had thrown himself into another chair in front of the fireplace. No warmth was ever too much for him. There was the usual pathos in his tone, but a faint consciousness of something amusing was in his face.

'Did she?' said Lady Markham with a laugh. 'The little impertinent! But you know, my dear boy, that is what I have always said.'

'Yes—it is quite true. You healthy people, you are always of opinion that one can get over it if one makes the effort; and there is no way of proving the contrary but by dying, which is a strong step.'

'A very strong step—one, I hope, that you will not think of taking. They are both very sincere, my girls, though in a different way. They mean what they say; and yet they do not mean it, Claude. That is, it is quite true; but does not affect their regard for you, which, I am sure, without implying any deeper feeling, is strong.'

He shook his head a little. 'Dear Lady Markham,' he said, 'you know if I am to marry, I want, above all things, to marry a daughter of yours.'

'Dear boy!' she said, with a look full of tender meaning.

'You have always been so good to me, since ever I can remember. But what am I to do if they—object? Constance—has run away from me, people say: run away—to escape *me!*' His voice took so tragically complaining a tone, that Lady Markham bit her lip and held her screen higher to conceal her smile. Next moment, however, she turned upon him with a perfectly grave and troubled face.

'Dear Claude!' she cried, 'what an injustice to poor Con. I thought I had explained all that to you. You have known all along the painful position I am in with their father, and you know how impulsive she is. And then, Markham——Alas!' she continued with a sigh, 'my position is very complicated, Claude. Markham is the best son that ever was; but you know I have to pay a great deal for it.'

'Ah!' said Claude; 'Nelly Winterbourn and all that,' with a good many sage nods of his head.

'Not only Nelly Winterbourn—there is no harm in her, that I know—but he has a great influence with the girls. It was he who put it into Constance's head to go to her father. I am quite sure it was. He put it before her that it was her duty.'

'O—oh!' Claude made this very English comment with the doubtful tone which it expresses; and added, 'Her duty!' with a very unconvinced air.

'He did so, I know. And she was so fond of adventure and change. I agreed with him partly afterwards that it was the best thing that could happen to her. She is finding out by experience what banishment from Society, and from all that makes life pleasant, is. I have no doubt she will come back—in a very different frame of mind.'

Claude did not respond, as perhaps Lady Markham expected him to do. He sat and dandled his leg before the fire, not looking at her. After some time, he said in a reflective way, 'Whoever I marry, she will have to resign herself to banishment, as you call it—that has been always understood. A warm climate in winter—and to be ready to start at any moment.'

'That is always understood—till you get stronger,' said Lady Markham in the gentlest tone. 'But you know I have always expected that you would get stronger. Remember, you have been kept at home all this year—and you are better; at all events you have not suffered.'

'Had I been sent away, Constance would have remained at home,' he said. 'I am not speaking out of irritation, but only to understand it fully. It is not as if I were finding fault with Constance; but you see for yourself she could not stand me all the year round. A fellow who has always to be thinking about the thermometer is trying.'

'My dear boy,' said Lady Markham, 'everything is trying. The thermometer is much less offensive than most things that men care for. Girls are brought up in that fastidious way: you all like them to be so, and to think they have refined tastes, and so forth; and then you are surprised when you find they have a little difficulty—— Constance was only fanciful, that was all—impatient.'

'Fanciful,' he repeated. 'That was what the little one said. I wish she were fanciful, and not so horribly well and strong.'

'My dear Claude,' said Lady Markham quickly, 'you would not like that at all! A delicate wife is the most dreadful thing—one that you would always have to be considering; who could not perhaps go to the places that suited you; who would not be able to go out with you when you wanted her. I don't insist upon a daughter of mine; but not that, not that, for your own sake, my dear boy!'

'I believe you are right,' he said, with a look of conviction. 'Then I suppose the only thing to be done is to wait for a little and see how things turn out. There is no hurry about it, you know.'

'Oh, no hurry!' she said, with uneasy assent. 'That is, if you are not in a hurry,' she added after a pause.

'No, I don't think so. I am rather enjoying myself, I think. It always does one good,' he said, getting up slowly, 'to come and have it out with you.'

Lady Markham said 'Dear boy!' once more, and gave him her hand, which he kissed; and then his audience was over. He went away; and she turned round to her writing-table to the inevitable correspondence. There was a little cloud upon her forehead so long as she was alone; but when another knock came at the door, it cleared by magic as she said 'Come in.' This time it was Sir Thomas who appeared. He was a tall man, with gray hair, and had the air of being very carefully brushed and dressed. He came in, and seated himself where Claude had been, but pushed back the chair from the fire.

'Don't you think,' he said, 'that you keep your room a little too warm?'

'Claude complained that it was cold. It is difficult to please everybody.'

'Oh, Claude. I have come to speak to you, dear Lady Markham, on a very different subject. I was talking to Frances last night.'

'So I perceived. And what do you think of my little girl?'

'You know,' he said, with some solemnity, 'the hopes I have always entertained that some time or other our dear Waring might be brought among us once more.'

'I have always told you,' said Lady Markham, 'that no difficulties should be raised by me.'

'You were always everything that is good and kind,' said Sir Thomas. 'I was talking to his dear little daughter last night. She reminds me very much of Waring, Lady Markham.'

'That is odd; for everybody tells me—and indeed I can see it myself—that she is like me.'

'She is very like you; still, she reminds me of her father more than I can say. I do think we have in her the instrument—the very instrument that is wanted. If he is ever to be brought back again——'

'Which I doubt,' she said, shaking her head.

'Don't let us doubt. With perseverance, everything is to be hoped; and here we have in our very hands what I have always looked for—some one devoted to him and very fond of you.'

'Is she very fond of me?' said Lady Markham. Her face softened—a little moisture crept into her eyes. 'Ah, Sir Thomas, I wonder if that is true. She was very much moved by the idea of her mother—a relation she had never known. She expected I don't know what, but more, I am sure, than she has found in me. Oh, don't say anything. I am scarcely surprised; I am not at all displeased. To come with your heart full of an ideal, and to find an ordinary woman—a woman in Society!' The moisture enlarged in Lady Markham's eyes—not tears, but yet a liquid mist that gave them pathos. She shook her head, looking at him with a smile.

'We need not argue the question,' said Sir Thomas, 'for I know she is very fond of you. You should have heard her stop me when she thought I was going to criticise you. Of course, had she known me better she would have known how impossible that was.'

Lady Markham did not say 'Dear Sir Thomas!' as she had said 'Dear boy!' but her look was the same as that which she had turned upon Claude. She was in no doubt as to what his account of her would be.

'She can persuade him, if anybody can,' he said. 'I think I shall go and see him as soon as I can get away—if you do not object. To bring our dear Waring back, to see you two together again, who have always been the objects of my warmest admiration——'

'You are too kind. You have always had a higher opinion of me than I deserve,' she said. 'One can only be grateful. One cannot try to persuade you that you are mistaken. As for my—husband'—there was the slightest momentary pause before she said the name—'I fear you will never get him to think so well of me as you do. It is a great misfortune; but still it sometimes happens that other people think more of a woman than—her very own.'

'You must not say that. Waring adored you.'

She shook her head again. 'He had a great admiration,' she said, 'for a woman to whom he gave my name. But he discovered that it was a mistake; and for me in my own person he had no particular feeling. Think a little whether you are doing wisely. If you should succeed in bringing us two together again——'

'What then?'

She did not say any more: her face grew pale, as by a sudden touch or breath. When such a tie as marriage is severed, if by death or by any other separation, it is not a light thing to renew it again. The thought of that possibility—which yet was not a possibility—suddenly realised, sent the blood back to Lady Markham's heart. It was not that she was unforgiving, or even that she had not a certain remainder of love for her husband. But to resume those habits of close companionship after so many years—to give up her own individuality, in part at least, and live a dual life—this thought startled her. She had said that she would put no difficulties in the way. But then she had not thought of all that was involved.

The next visitor who interrupted her retirement came in without the preliminary of knocking. It was Markham who thus made his appearance, presenting himself to the full daylight in his light clothes and colourless aspect; not very well dressed, a complete contrast to the beautiful if sickly youth of her first visitor, and to the size and vigour of the other. Markham had neither beauty nor vigour. Even the usual keenness and humorous look had gone out of his face. He held a letter in his hand. He did not, like the others, put himself into the chair where Lady Markham, herself turned from the light, could mark every change of countenance in her interlocutor. He went up to the fire with the ease of the master of the house, and stood in front of it as an Englishman loves to do. But he was not quite at his ease on this occasion. He said nothing until he had assumed his place, and even stood for a whole minute or more silent before he found his voice. Lady Markham had turned her chair towards him at once, and sat with her head raised and expectant, watching him. For with Markham, never very reticent of his words, this prolonged pause seemed to mean that there was something important to say. But it did not appear when he spoke. He put the forefinger of one hand on the letter he held in the other. 'I have heard from the Winterbourns,' he said. 'They are coming to-morrow.'

Lady Markham made the usual little exclamation 'Oh!'—faintly breathed with the slightest catch, as if it might have meant more. Then, after a moment—'Very well, Markham: they can have their usual rooms,' she said.

Again there was a little pause. Then—'He is not very well,' said Markham.

'Oh, that is a pity,' she replied with very little concern.

'That's not strong enough. I believe he is rather ill. They are leaving the Crosslands sooner than they intended because there's no doctor there.'

'Then it is a good thing,' said Lady Markham, 'that there is such a good doctor here. We are so healthy a party, he is quite thrown away on us.'

Markham did not find that his mother divined what he wanted to say with her usual promptitude. 'I am afraid Winterbourn is in a bad way,' he said at length, moving uneasily from one foot to the other, and avoiding her eye.

'Do you mean that there is anything serious—dangerous? Good heavens!' cried Lady Markham, now fully roused, 'I hope she is not going to bring that man to die here.'

'That's just what I have been thinking. It would be decidedly awkward.'

'Oh, awkward is not the word,' cried Lady Markham, with a sudden vision of all the inconveniences: her pretty house turned upside down—though it was not hers, but his—a stop put to everything—the flight of her guests in every direction—herself detained and separated from all her social duties. 'You take it very coolly,' she said. 'You must write and say it is impossible in the circumstances.'

'Can't,' said Markham. 'They must have started by this time. They are to travel slowly—to husband his strength.'

'To husband——! Telegraph, then! Good heavens! Markham, don't you see what a dreadful nuisance—how impossible in every point of view.'

'Come,' he said, with a return of his more familiar tone. 'There's no evidence that he means to die here. I daresay he won't, if he can help it, poor beggar! The telegraph is as impossible as the post. We are in for it, mammy. Let's hope he'll pull through.'

'And if he doesn't, Markham!'

'That will be—more awkward still,' he said. Markham was not himself: he shuffled from one foot to another, and looked straight before him, never glancing aside with those keen looks of understanding which made his insignificant countenance interesting. His mother was, what mothers too seldom are, his most intimate friend; but he did not meet her eye. His hands were thrust into his pockets, his shoulders up to his ears. At last a faint and doubtful gleam broke over his face. He burst into a sudden chuckle—one of those hoarse brief notes of laughter which were peculiar to him. 'By Jove! it would be poetic justice,' he said.

Lady Markham showed no inclination to laughter. 'Is there nothing we can do?' she cried.

'Think of something else,' said Markham, with a sudden recovery. 'I always find that the best thing to do—for the moment. What was Claude saying to you—and t'other man?'

'Claude! I don't know what he was saying. News like this is enough to drive everything else out of one's head. He is wavering between Con and Frances.'

'Mother, I told you. Frances will have nothing to say to him.'

'Frances—will obey the leading of events, I hope.'

'Poor little Fan! I don't think she will, though. That child has a great deal in her. She shows her parentage.'

'Sir Thomas says she reminds him much of her—father,' Lady Markham said, with a faint smile.

'There is something of Waring too,' said her son, nodding his head.

This seemed to jar upon the mother. She changed colour a little; and then added, her smile growing more constrained: 'He thinks she may be a powerful instrument in—changing his mind—bringing him, after all these years, back'—here she paused a little, as if seeking for a phrase; then added, her smile growing less and less pleasant—'to his duty.'

Then Markham for the first time looked at her. He had been paying but partial attention up to this moment, his mind being engrossed with difficulties of his own; but he awoke at this suggestion, and looked at her with something of his usual keenness, but with a gravity not at all usual. And she met his eye with an awakening in hers which was still more remarkable. For a moment they thus contemplated each other, not like mother and son, nor like the dear and close friends they were, but like two antagonists suddenly perceiving, on either side, the coming conflict. For almost the first time there woke in Lady Markham's mind a consciousness that it was possible her son, who had been always her champion, her defender, her companion, might wish her out of his way. She looked at him with a rising colour, with all her nerves thrilling, and her whole soul on the alert for his next words. These were words which he would have preferred not to speak; but they seemed to be forced from his lips against his will, though even as he said them he explained to himself that they had been in his mind to say before he knew—before the dilemma that might occur had seemed possible.

'Yes?' he said. 'I understand what he means. I—even I—had been thinking that something of the sort—might be a good thing.'

She clasped her hands with a quick passionate movement. 'Has it come to this—in a moment—without warning?' she cried.

## CHAPTER XXX

THE Winterbourns came next day: he to the best room in the house, a temperature carefully kept up to sixty-five degrees, and the daily attentions of the excellent doctor, who, Lady Markham declared, was thrown away upon her healthy household. Mr. Winterbourn was a man of fifty, a confirmed invalid, who travelled with a whole paraphernalia of medicaments, and a servant who was a trained nurse, and very skilful in all the lower branches of the medical craft. Mrs. Winterbourn, however, was not like this. She was young, pretty, lively, fond of what she called 'fun,' and by no means bound to her husband's sick-room. Everybody said she was very kind to him. She never refused to go to him when he wanted her. Of her own accord, as part of her usual routine, she would go into his room three or even four times a-day to see if she could do anything. She sat with him always while Roberts the man-nurse had his dinner. What more could a woman do? She had indeed, it was understood, married him against her will; but that is an accident not to be avoided, and she had always been a model of propriety. They were asked everywhere, which, considering how little adapted he was for society, was nothing less than the highest proof of how much she was thought of; and the most irreproachable matrons did not hesitate to invite Lord Markham to meet the Winterbourns. It was a wonderful, quite an ideal friendship, everybody said. And it was such a comfort to both of them! For Markham, considering the devotion he had always shown to his mother, would probably find it very inconvenient to marry, which is the only thing which makes friendship between a man and a woman difficult. A woman does not like her devoted friend to marry: that is the worst of those delicate relationships, and it is the point upon which they generally come to shipwreck in the end. As a matter of course, any other harm of a grosser kind was not so much as thought of by any one who knew them. There were people, however, who asked themselves and each other, as a fine problem, one of those cases of complication which it pleases the human intellect to resolve, what would happen if Winterbourn died?—a thing which he was continually threatening to do. It had been at one time quite a favourite subject of speculation in society. Some said that it would not suit Markham at all,—that he would get out of it somehow; some, that there would be no escape for him; some, that with such a fine jointure as Nelly would have, it would set the little man up, if he could give up his 'ways.' Markham had not a very good reputation, though everybody knew that he was the best son in the world. He played, it was said, more and otherwise than a man of his position ought to play. He was often amusing, and always nice to women, so that society never in the least broke with him, and he had champions everywhere. But the mere fact that he required champions was a proof that all was not exactly as it ought to be. He was a man with a great many 'ways,' which of course it is natural to suppose would be bad ways, though, except in the matter of play, no one knew very well what they were.

Winterbourn, however, had never been so bad as he was on this occasion, when he was almost lifted out of the carriage and carried to his room, his very host being allowed no speech of him till next morning, after he was supposed to have got over the fatigue of the journey. The doctor, when he was summoned, shook his head and looked very grave; and it may be imagined what talks went on among the guests when no one of the family was present to hear. These talks were sometimes carried on before Frances, who was scarcely realised as the daughter of the house. Even Claude Ramsay forgot his own pressing concerns in consideartion of the urgent question of the moment, and Sir Thomas ceased to think of Waring. Frances gleaned from what she heard that they were all preparing for flight. 'Of course, in case anything dreadful happens, dear Lady Markham,' they said, 'will no doubt go too.'

'What a funny thing,' said one of the Miss Montagues, 'if it should happen in this house.'

'Funny, Laura! You mean dreadful,' cried her mother. 'Do choose your words a little better.'

'Oh, you know what I mean, mamma!' cried the young lady.

'You must think it dreadful indeed,' said Mrs. Montague, addressing Frances, 'that we should discuss such a sad thing in this way. Of course, we are all very sorry for poor Mr. Winterbourn; and if he had been ill and dying in his own house——. But one's mind is occupied at present by the great inconvenience—oh, more than that—the horror and—and embarrassment to your dear mother.'

'All that,' said Sir Thomas with a certain solemnity. Perhaps it was the air of unusual gravity with which he uttered these two words which raised the smallest momentary titter,—no, not so much as a titter—a faintly audible smile, if such an expression may be used,—chiefly among the young ladies, who had perhaps a clearer realisation of the kind of embarrassment that was meant than was expected of them. But Frances had no clue whatever to it. She replied warmly—

'My mother will not think of the inconvenience. It is surely those who are in such trouble themselves who are the only people to think about. Poor Mrs. Winterbourn——'

'Who is it that is speaking of me in such a kind voice?' said the sick man's wife.

She had just come into the room; and she was very well aware that she was being discussed by everybody about—herself and her circumstances, and all those contingencies which were, in spite of herself, beginning to stir her own mind, as they had already done the minds of all around. That is one thing which in any crisis people in society may be always sure of, that their circumstances are being fully talked over by their friends.

'I hope we have all kind voices when we speak of you, my dear Nelly. This one was Frances Waring, our new little friend here.'

'Ah, that explains,' said Mrs. Winterbourn; and she went on, without saying more, to the conservatory, which opened from the drawing-room in which the party was seated. They were silenced, though they had not been saying anything very bad of her. The sudden appearance of the person discussed always does make a certain impression. The gentlemen of the group dispersed, the ladies began to talk of something else. Frances, very shy, yet burdened with a great desire to say or do something towards the consolation of those who were, as she had said, in such trouble, went after Mrs. Winterbourn. She had seated herself where the big palms and other exotic foliage were thickest, out of sight of the drawing-room, close to the open doorway that led to the lawn and the sea. Frances was a little surprised that the wife of a man who was thought to be dying should leave his bedside at all; but she reflected that to prevent breaking down, and thus being no longer of any use to the patient, it was the duty of every nurse to take a certain amount of rest and fresh air. She felt, however, more and more timid as she approached. Mrs. Winterbourn had not the air of a nurse. She was dressed in her usual way, with her usual ornaments—not too much, but yet enough to make a tinkle, had she been at the side of a sick person, and possibly to have disturbed him. Two or three bracelets on a pretty arm are very pretty things; but they are not very suitable for a sick-nurse. She was sitting with a book in one hand, leaning her head upon the other, evidently not reading, evidently very serious. Frances was encouraged by the downcast face.

'I hope you will not think me very bold,' she said, the other starting and turning round at the sound of her voice. 'I wanted to ask if I could help you in any way. I am very good for keeping awake, and I could get you what you wanted. Oh, I don't mean that I am good enough to be trusted as nurse; but if I might sit up with you—in the next room—to get you what you want.'

'What do you mean, child?' the young woman said in a quick, startled, half-offended voice. She was not very much older than Frances, but her experiences had been very different. She thought offence was meant. Lady Markham had always been kind to her, which was, she felt, somewhat to Lady Markham's own advantage, for Nelly knew that Markham would never marry so long as her influence lasted, and this was for his mother's good. But now it was very possible that Lady Markham was trembling, and had put her little daughter forward to give a sly stroke. Her tone softened, however, as she looked up in Frances' face. It was perhaps only that the girl was a little simpleton, and meant what she said. 'You think I sit up at night?' she said. 'Oh no. I should be of no use. Mr. Winterbourn has his own servant, who knows exactly what to do; and the doctor is to send a nurse to let Roberts get a little rest. It is very good of you. Nursing is quite the sort of thing people go in for now, isn't it? But, unfortunately, poor Mr. Winterbourn can't bear amateurs, and I should do no good.'

She gave Frances a bright smile as she said this, and turned again towards the scene outside, opening her book at the same time, which was like a dismissal. But at that moment, to the great surprise of Frances, Markham appeared without, strolling towards the open door. He came in when he saw his little sister, nodding to her with a look which stopped her as she was about to turn away.

'I am glad you are making friends with Frances,' he said. 'How is Winterbourn now?'

'I wish everybody would not ask me every two minutes how he is now,' cried the young wife. 'He doesn't change from one half hour to another. Oh, impatient; yes, I am impatient. I am half out of my senses, what with one thing and another; and here is your sister—your sister—asking to help me to nurse him! That was all that was wanting, I think, to drive me quite mad!'

'I am sure little Fan never thought she would produce such a terrible result. Be reasonable, Nelly.'

'Don't call me Nelly, sir; and don't tell me to be reasonable. Don't you know how they are all talking, these horrible people? Oh, why, why did I bring him here?'

'Whatever was the reason, it can't be undone now,' said

Markham. 'Come, Nelly! This is nothing but nerves, you know. You can be yourself when you please.'

'Do you know why he talks to me like that before you?' said Mrs. Winterbourn, suddenly turning upon Frances. 'It is because he thinks things are coming to a crisis, and that I shall be compelled——' Here the hasty creature came to a pause and stared suddenly round her. 'Oh, I don't know what I am saying, Geoff! They are all talking, talking in every corner about you and me.'

'Run away, Fan,' said her brother. 'Mrs. Winterbourn, you see, is not well. The best thing for her is to be left in quiet. Run away.'

'It is you who ought to go away, Markham, and leave her to me.'

'Oh!' said Markham, with a gleam of amusement, 'you set up for that too, Fan! But I know better how to take care of Nelly than you do. Run away.'

The consternation with which Frances obeyed this request it would be difficult to describe. She had not understood the talk in the drawing-room, and she did not understand this. But it gave her ideas a strange shock. A woman whose husband was dying, and who was away from him—who called Markham by his Christian name, and apparently preferred his ministrations to her own! She would not go back as she came, to afford the ladies in the drawing-room a new subject for their comments, but went out instead by the open door, not thinking that the only path by which she could return indoors led past the window of her mother's room, which opened on the lawn round the angle of the house. Lady Markham was standing there looking out as Frances came in sight. She knocked upon the window to call her daughter's attention, and, opening it hurriedly, called her in. 'Have you seen Markham?' she said, almost before Frances could hear.

'I have left him, this moment.'

'*You* have left him. Is he alone, then? Who is with him? Is Nelly Winterbourn there?'

Frances could not tell why it was that she disliked to answer. She made a little assenting movement of her head.

'It ought not to be,' cried Lady Markham—'not at this moment—at any other time, if they like, but not now. Don't you see the difference? Before, nothing was possible. Now—when at any moment she may be a free woman, and Markham—— Don't you see the difference? They should not, they should not, be together now'!

Frances stood before her mother, feeling that a claim was made upon her which she did not even understand, and feeling also a helplessness which was altogether foreign to her ordinary sensations. She did not understand, nor wish to understand—it was odious to her to think even what it could mean. And what could she do? Lady Markham was agitated and excited—not able to control herself.

'For I have just seen the doctor,' she cried, 'and he says that it is a question not even of days, but of hours. Good heavens, child! only think of it,—that such a thing should happen here; and that Markham—*Markham!*—should have to manage everything. Oh, it is indecent—there is no other word for it. Go and call him to me. We must get him to go away.'

'Mamma,' said Frances, 'how can I go back? He told me to go and leave them.'

'He is a fool,' cried Lady Markham, stamping her foot. 'He does not see how he is committing himself; he does not mind. Oh, what does it matter what he said to you! Run at once and bring him to me. Say I have something urgent to tell him. Say—oh, say anything! If Constance had been here, she would have known.'

Frances was very sensible to the arrow thus flung at her in haste, without thought. She was so stung by it, that she turned hastily to do her mother's commission at all costs. But before she had taken half a dozen steps, Markham himself appeared, coming leisurely, easily, with his usual composure, round the corner. 'What's wrong with you, little un?' he asked. 'You are not vexed at what I said to you, Fan? I couldn't help it, my dear.'

'It isn't that, Markham. It is—mamma.'

And then Lady Markham, too much excited to wait, came out to join them. 'Do you know the state of affairs, Markham? Does she know? I want you to go off instantly, without losing a moment, to Southampton, to fetch Dr. Howard. Quick! There is just time to get the boat.'

'Dr. Howard? What is wrong with the man here?'

'He is afraid of the responsibility—at least I am, Markham. Think—in your house! Oh yes, my dear, go without delay.'

Markham paused, and looked at her with his keen little eyes. 'Mother, why don't you say at once you want to get me out of the way?'

'I do. I don't deny it, Markham. But this too. We ought to have another opinion. Do, for any favour, what I ask you, dear; oh, do it! Oh yes, I would rather you sent him here, and did not come back with him. But come back, if you must; only, go, go now.'

'You think he will be—dead before I could get back? I will telegraph for Dr. Howard, mother; but I will not go away.'

'You can do no good, Markham—except to make people talk. Oh, for mercy's sake, whatever you may do afterwards, go now.'

'I will go and telegraph—with pleasure,' he said.

Lady Markham turned and took Frances' arm, as he left them. 'I think I must give in now altogether,' she cried. 'All is going wrong with me. First Con, and then my boy. For now I see what will happen. And you don't know, you can't think what Markham has been to me. Oh, he has been everything to me! And now—I know what will happen now.'

'Mamma,' said Frances, trembling. She wanted to say that little as she herself was, she was one who would never forsake her mother. But she was so conscious that Lady Markham's thoughts went over her head and took no note of her, that the words were stifled on her lips. 'He said to me once that he could never—leave you,' she said, faltering, though it was not what she meant to say.

'He said to you once——? Then he has been thinking of it; he has been discussing the question?' Lady Markham said with bitterness. She leant heavily upon Frances' arm, but not with any tender appreciation of the girl's wistful desire to comfort her. 'That means,' she said, 'that I can never desert him. I must go now and get rid of all this excitement, and put on a composed face, and tell the people that they may go away if they like. It will be the right thing for them to go away. But I can't stay here with death in the house, and take a motherly care of—of that girl, whom I never trusted—whom Markham—— And she will marry him within the year. I know it.'

Frances made a little outcry of horror, being greatly disturbed—'Oh no, no!' without any meaning, for she indeed knew nothing.

'No! How can you say No?—when you are quite in ignorance. I can't tell you what Markham would wish—to be let alone, most likely, if they would let him alone. But she will do it. She always was headstrong; and now she will be rich. Oh, what a thing it is altogether—like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. Who could have imagined, when we came down here so tranquilly, with nothing unusual—— If I thought of any change at all, it was perhaps that Claude—whom, by the way, you must not be rude to, Frances—that Claude might perhaps—— And now, here is everything unsettled, and my life turned upside down.'

What did she hope that Claude would have done? Frances' brain was all perplexed. She had plunged into a sudden sea of troubles, without knowing even what the wild elements were that lashed the placid waters into fury and made the sky dark all around.

## CHAPTER XXXI

THE crisis, however, was averted—'mercifully,' as Lady Markham said. Dr. Howard from Southampton—whom she had thought of only by chance, on the spur of the moment, as a way of getting rid of Markham—produced some new lights; and in reality was so successful with the invalid, that he rallied, and it became possible to remove him by slow stages to his own house, to die there, which he did in due course, but some time after, and decorously, in the right way and place. Frances felt herself like a spectator at a play during all this strange interval, looking on at the third act of a tragedy, which somehow had got involved in a drawing-room comedy, with scenes alternating, and throwing a kind of wretched reflection of their poor humour upon the tableaux of the darker drama. She thought that she never should forget the countenance of Nelly Winterbourn as she took her seat beside her husband in the invalid carriage in which he was conveyed away, and turned to wave a farewell to the little group which had assembled to watch the departure. Her face was quivering with a sort of despairing impatience, wretchedness, self-pity, the miserable anticipations of a living creature tied to one who was dead—nerves and temper and every part of her being wrought to a feverish excitement, made half delirious by the prospect, the possibility, of escape. A wretched sort of spasmodic smile was upon her lips as she waved her hand to the spectators—those spectators all on the watch to read her countenance, who, she knew, were as well aware of the position as herself. Frances was learning the lesson thus set practically before her with applications of her own. She knew now to a great extent what it all meant, and why Markham disappeared as soon as the carriage drove away; while her mother, with an aspect of intense relief, returned to her guests. 'I feel as if I could breathe again,' Lady Markham said. 'Not that I should have grudged anything I could do for poor dear Nelly; but there is something so terrible in a death in one's house.'

'I quite enter into your feelings, dear—oh, quite!' said Mrs. Montague; 'most painful, and most embarrassing besides.'

'Oh, as for that!' said Lady Markham. 'It would have been indeed a great annoyance and vexation to break up our pleasant party, and put out all your plans. But one has to submit in such cases. However, I am most thankful it has not come to that. Poor Mr. Winterbourn may last yet—for months, Dr. Howard says.'

'Dear me; do you think that is to be desired?' said the other, 'for poor Nelly's sake.'

'Poor Nelly!' said the young ladies. 'Only fancy months! What a terrible fate!'

'And yet it was supposed to be a great match for her, a penniless girl!'

'It was a great match,' said Lady Markham composedly. 'And dear Nelly has always behaved so well. She is an example to many women that have much less to put up with than she has. Frances, will you see about the lawn-tennis?

I am sure you want to shake off the impression, you poor girls, who have been *so* good.'

'Oh, dear Lady Markham, you don't suppose we could have gone on laughing and making a noise while there was such anxiety in the house. But we shall like a game, now that there is no impropriety——'

'And we are all so glad,' said the mother, 'that there was no occasion for turning out; for our visits are so dovetailed, I don't know where we should have gone—and our house in the hands of the workmen. I, for one, am very thankful that poor Mr. Winterbourn has a little longer to live.'

Thus, after this singular episode, the ordinary life of the household was resumed; and though the name of poor Nelly recurred at intervals for a day or two, there were many things that were of more importance—a great garden-party, for instance, for which, fortunately, Lady Markham had not cancelled the invitations; a yachting expedition, and various other pleasant things. The comments of the company were diverted to Claude, who, finding Frances more easily convinced than the others that draughts were to be carefully avoided, sought her out on most occasions, notwithstanding her plain-speaking about his fancifulness.

'Perhaps you were right,' he said, 'that I think too much about my health. I shouldn't wonder if you were quite right. But I have always been warned that I was very delicate; and perhaps that makes one rather a bore to one's friends.'

'Oh, I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Ramsay! I never meant——'

'There is poor Winterbourn, you see,' said Claude, accepting the broken apology with a benevolent nod of his head and the mild pathos of a smile. 'He was one of your rash people, never paying any attention to what was the matter with him. He was quite a well-preserved sort of man when he married Nelly St. John; and now you see what a wreck! By Jove, though, I shouldn't like my wife, if I married, to treat me like Nelly. But I promise you there should be no Markham in my case.'

'I don't know what Markham has to do with it,' said Frances with sudden spirit.

'Oh, you don't know! Well,' he continued, looking at her, 'perhaps you don't know; and so much the better. Never mind about Markham. I should expect my wife to be with me when I am ill; not to leave me to servants, to give me my—everything I had to take; and to cheer me up, you know.. Do you think there is anything unreasonable in that?'

'Oh no, indeed. Of course, if—if—she was fond of you—which of course she would be, or you would not want to marry her.'

'Yes,' said Claude. 'Go on, please; I like to hear you talk.'

'I mean,' said Frances, stumbling a little, feeling a significance in this encouragement which disturbed her, 'that, *of course*—there would be no question of reasonableness. She would just do it by nature. One never asks if it is reasonable or not.'

'Ah, you mean you wouldn't. But other girls are different. There is Con, for instance.'

'Mr. Ramsay, I don't think you ought to speak to me so about my sister. Constance, if she were in such a position, would do—what was right.'

'For that matter, I suppose Nelly Winterbourn does what is right—at least, every one says she behaves so well. If that is what you mean by right, I shouldn't relish it at all in my wife.'

Frances said nothing for a minute, and then she asked, 'Are you going to be married, Mr. Ramsay?' in a tone which was half indignant, half amused.

At this he started a little, and gave her an inquiring look. 'That is a question that wants thinking of,' he said. 'Yes, I suppose I am, if I can find any one as nice as that. You are always giving me *renseignements*, Miss Waring. If I can find some one who will, as you say, never ask whether it is reasonable——'

'Then,' said Frances, recovering something of the sprightliness which had distinguished her in old days, 'you don't want to marry any one in particular, but just a wife?'

'What else could I marry?' he asked in a peevish tone. Then, with a change of his voice,—'I don't want to conceal anything from you; and there is no doubt you must have heard: I was engaged to your sister Con; but she ran away from me,' he added with pathos. 'You must have heard that.'

'I do not wonder that you were very fond of her,' cried Frances. 'I see no one so delightful as—she would be if she were here.'

She had meant to make a simple statement, and say, 'No one so delightful as she;' but paused, remembering that the circumstances had not been to Constance's advantage, and that here she would have been in her proper sphere.

As for Claude, he was somewhat embarrassed. He said, 'Fond is perhaps not exactly the word. I thought she would have suited me—better than any one I knew.'

'If that was all,' said Frances, 'you would not mind very much; and I do not wonder that she came away, for it would be rather dreadful to be married because a gentleman thought one suited him.'

'Oh, I don't mean that would be so—in every case,' cried Claude, with sudden earnestness.

'In any case, I think you should never tell the girl's sister, Mr. Ramsay; it is not a very nice thing to do.'

'Miss Waring—Frances!—I was not thinking of you as any girl's sister; I was thinking of you——'

'I hope not at all; for it would be a great pity to waste any more thoughts on our family,' said Frances. 'I have sometimes been a little vexed that Constance came, for it changed all my life, and took me away from every one I knew. But I am glad you have told me this, for now I understand it quite.' She did not rise from where she was seated and leave him, as he almost hoped she would, making a little quarrel of it, but sat still, with a composure which Claude felt was much less complimentary. 'Now that I know all about it,' she said, after a little interval, with a laugh, 'I think what you want would be very unreasonable—and what no woman could do.'

'You said the very reverse five minutes ago,' he said sulkily.

'Yes—but I didn't know what the—what the wages were,' she said with another laugh. 'It is you who are giving me *renseignements* now.'

Claude took his complaint next morning to Lady Markham's room. 'She actually chaffed me—chaffed me, I assure you; though she looks as if butter would not melt in her mouth.'

'That is a little vulgar, Claude. If you talk like that to a girl, what can you expect? Some, indeed, may be rather grateful to you, as showing how little you look for; but you know I have always told you what you ought to try to do is to inspire a *grande passion.*'

'That is what I should like above all things to do,' said the young man; 'but——'

'But—it would cost too much trouble?'

'Perhaps; and I am not an impassioned sort of man. Lady Markham, was it really from me that Constance ran away?'

'I have told you before, Claude, that was not how it should be spoken of. She did not run away. She took into her head a romantic idea of making acquaintance with her father, in which Markham encouraged her. Or perhaps it was Markham that put it into her head. It is possible—I can't tell you—that Markham had already something else in his own head, and that he had begun to think it would be a good thing to try if other changes could be made.'

'What could Markham have in his head? and what changes——'

'Oh,' she cried, 'how can you ask me? I know how you have all been talking. You speculate, just as I do.'

'I don't think so, Lady Markham,' said Claude. 'I am sure Markham would find all that sort of thing a great bore. Of course I know what you mean. But I don't think so. I have always told them my opinion. Whatever may happen, Markham will stick to you.'

'Poor Markham!' she said, with a quick revulsion of feeling. 'After all, it is a little hard, is it not, that he should have nothing brighter than that to look to in his life?'

'Than you?' said Claude. 'If you ask my opinion, I don't think so. I think he's a lucky fellow. An old mother, I don't deny, might be a bore. An old lady, half blind, never hearing what you say, sitting by the fire—like the mothers in books, or the Mrs. Nickleby kind. But you are as young and handsome and bright as any of them—keeping everything right for him, asking nothing. Upon my word, I think he is very well off. I wish I were in his place.'

Lady Markham was pleased. Affectionate flattery of this kind is always sweet to a woman. She laughed, and said he was a gay deceiver. 'But, my dear boy, you will make me think a great deal more of myself than I have any right to think.'

'You ought to think more of yourself. And so you really do not think that Con——? In many ways, dear Lady Markham, I feel that Con—understood me better than any one else—except you.'

'I think you are right, Claude,' she said, with a grave face.

'I am beginning to feel quite sure I am right. When she writes, does she never say anything about me?'

'Of course, she always—asks for you.'

'Is that all? Asking does not mean much.'

'What more could she say? Of course she knows that she has lost her place in your affection by her own rashness.'

'Not lost, Lady Markham. It is not so easy to do that.'

'It is true. Perhaps I should have said, fears that she has forfeited—your respect.'

'After all, she has done nothing wrong,' he said.

'Nothing wrong; but rash, headstrong, foolish. Oh yes, she has been all that. It is in the Waring blood!'

'I think you are a little hard upon her, Lady Markham. By the way, don't you think yourself, that with two daughters to marry, and—and all that: it would be a good thing if Mr. Waring—for you must have got over all your little tiffs long ago—don't you think that it would be a good thing if he could be persuaded to—come back?'

She had watched him with eyes that gleamed from below her dropped eyelids. She said now, as she had done to Sir Thomas, 'I should put no difficulties in the way, you may be sure.'

'It would be more respectable,' said Claude. 'If getting old is good for anything, you know, it should make up quarrels; don't you think so? It would be a great deal better in every way. And then Markham——'

'Markham,' she said, 'you think, would then be free?'

'Well—then it wouldn't matter particularly about Markham, what he did,' the young man said.

Lady Markham had borne a great many such assaults in her life as if she felt nothing: but as a matter of fact she did feel them deeply; and when a probable new combination was thus calmly set before her, her usual composure was put to a severe test. She smiled upon Claude, indeed, as long as he remained with her, and allowed him no glimpse of her real feelings; but when he was gone, felt for a moment her heart fail her. She had, even in the misfortunes which had crossed her life, secured always a great share of her own way. Many people do this even when they suffer most. Whether they get it cheerfully or painfully, they yet get it, which is always something. Waring, when, in his fastidious impatience and irritation, because he did not get his, he had flung forth into the unknown, and abandoned her and her life altogether, did still, though at the cost of pain and scandal, help his wife to this triumph, that she departed from none of her requirements, and remained mistress of the battlefield. She had her own way, though he would not yield to it. But as a woman grows older, and becomes less capable of that pertinacity which is the best means of securing her own way, and when the conflicting wills against hers are many instead of being only one, the state of the matter changes. Constance had turned against her, when she was on the eve of an arrangement which would have been so very much for Con's good. And Frances, though so submissive in some points, would not be so, she felt instinctively, on others. And Markham—that was the most fundamental shock of all—Markham might possibly in the future have prospects and hopes independent altogether of his mother's, in antagonism with all her arrangements. This, which she had not anticipated, went to her heart. And when she thought of what had been suggested to her with so much composure—the alteration of her whole life, the substitution of her husband, from whom she had been so long parted, who did not think as she did nor live as she did for her son, who, with all his faults, which she knew so well, was yet in sympathy with her in all she thought and wished and knew—this suggestion made her sick and faint. It had come, though not with any force, even from Markham himself. It had come from Sir Thomas, who was one of the oldest of her friends; and now Claude set it before her in all the forcible simplicity of commonplace: it would be more respectable! She laughed almost violently when he left her, but it was a laugh which was not far from tears.

'Claude has been complaining of you,' she said to Frances, recovering herself with an instantaneous effort when her daughter came into the room; 'but I don't object, my dear. Unless you had found that you could like him yourself, which would have been the best thing, perhaps—you were quite right in what you said. So far as Constance is concerned, it is all that I could wish.'

'Mamma,' said Frances, 'you don't want Constance—you would not let her—accept *that?*'

'Accept what? My love, you must not be so emphatic. Accept a life full of luxury, splendour even, if she likes—and every care forestalled. My dear little girl, you don't know anything about the world.'

Frances pondered for some time before she replied. 'Mamma,' she said again, 'if such a case arose—you said that the best thing for me would have been to have liked—Mr. Ramsay. There is no question of that. But if such a case arose——'

'Yes, my dear'—Lady Markham took her daughter's hand in her own, and looked at her with a smile of pleasure—'I hope it will some day. And what then?'

'Would you—think the same about me? Would you consider the life full of luxury, as you said—would you desire for me the same thing as for Constance?'

Lady Markham held the girl's hand clasped in both of hers; the soft caressing atmosphere about her enveloped Frances. 'My dear,' she said, 'this is a very serious question. You are not asking me for curiosity alone?'

'It is a very serious question,' Frances said.

And the mother and daughter looked at each other closely, with more meaning, perhaps, than had as yet been in the eyes of either, notwithstanding all the excitement of interest in their first meeting. It was some time before another word was said. Frances saw in her mother a woman full of determination, very clear as to what she wanted, very unlikely to be turned from it by softer impulses, although outside she was so tender and soft; and Lady Markham saw in Frances a girl who was entirely submissive, yet immovable, whose dove's eyes had a steady soft gaze, against which the kindred light of her own had no power. It was a mutual revelation. There was no conflict, nor appearance of conflict, between these two, so like each other—two gentle and soft-voiced women, both full of natural courtesy and disinclination to wound or offend; both seeing everything around them very clearly from her own, perhaps limited, point of view; and both feeling that between them nothing but the absolute truth would do.

'You trouble me, Frances,' said Lady Markham at length. 'When such a case arises, it will be time enough. In the abstract, I should of course feel for one as I feel for the other. Nay, stop a little. I should wish to provide for you, as for Constance, a life of assured comfort,—well, if you drive me to it—of wealth and all that wealth brings. Assuredly that is what I should wish.' She gave Frances' hand a pressure which was almost painful, and then dropped it. 'I hope you have no fancy for poverty theoretically, like your patron saint,' she added lightly, trying to escape from the gravity of the question by a laugh.

'Mother,' said Frances, in a voice which was tremulous and yet steady, 'I want to tell you—I think neither of poverty nor of money. I am more used, perhaps, to the one than the other. I will do what you wish in everything—everything else; but——'

'Not in the one thing which would probably be the only thing I asked of you,' said Lady Markham, with a smile. She put her hands on Frances' shoulders and gave her a kiss upon her cheek. 'My dear child, you probably think this is quite original,' she said; 'but I assure you it is what almost every daughter one time or other says to her parents: Anything *else*—anything, but—— Happily there is no question between you and me. Let us wait till the occasion arises. It is always time enough to fall out.'

## CHAPTER XXXII

NOTHING happened of any importance before their return to Eaton Square. Markham, hopping about with a queer sidelong motion he had, his little eyes screwed up with humorous meaning, seemed to Frances to recover his spirits after the Winterbourn episode was over, which was the subject—though that, of course, she did not know—of half the voluminous correspondence of all the ladies and gentlemen in the house, whose letters were so important a part of their existence. Before a week was over, all Society was aware of the fact that Ralph Winterbourn had been nearly dying at Markham Priory; that Lady Markham was in 'a state' which baffled description, and Markham himself so changed as to be scarcely recognisable; but that, fortunately, the crisis had been tided over, and everything was still problematical. But the problem was so interesting, that one perfumed epistle after another carried it to curious wits all over the country, and a new light upon the subject was warmly welcomed in a hundred Easter meetings. What would Markham do? What would Nelly do? Would their friendship end in the vulgar way, in a marriage? Would they venture, in face of all prognostications, to keep it up as a friendship, when there was no longer any reason why it should not ripen into love? Or would they, frightened by all the inevitable comments which they would have to encounter, stop short altogether, and fly from each other?

Such a 'case' is a delightful thing to speculate upon. At the Priory, it could only be discussed in secret conclave; and though no doubt the experienced persons chiefly concerned were quite conscious of the subject which occupied their friends' thoughts, there was no further reference made to it between them, and everything went on as it had always done. The night before their return to town, Markham, in the solitude of the house, from which all the guests had just departed, called Frances outside to bear him company while he smoked his cigarette. He was walking up and down on the lawn in the gray stillness of a cloudy warm evening, when there was no light to speak of anywhere, and yet a good deal to be seen through the wavering grayness of sky and sea. A few stars, very mild and indistinct, looked out at the edges of the clouds here and there; the great water-line widened and cleared towards the horizon; and in the far distance, where a deeper grayness showed the mainland, the gleam of a lighthouse surprised the dark by slow continual revolutions. There was no moon: something softer, more seductive than even the moon, was in this absence of light.

'Well—now they're gone, what do you think of them, Fan? They're very good specimens of the English country-house party—all kinds: the respectable family, the sturdy old fogy, the rich young man without health, and the muscular young man without money.' There had been, it is needless to say, various other members of the party, who, being quite unimportant to this history, need not be mentioned here. 'What do you think of them, little un? You have your own way of seeing things.'

'I—like them all well enough, Markham,' without enthusiasm Frances replied.

'That is comprehensive at least. So do I, my dear. It would not have occurred to me to say it; but it is just the right thing to say. They pull you to pieces almost before your face; but they are not ill-natured. They tell all sorts of stories about each other——'

'No, Markham; I don't think that is just.'

'——Without meaning any harm,' he went on. 'Fan, in countries where conversation is cultivated, perhaps people don't talk scandal—I only say perhaps—but here we are forced to take to it for want of anything else to say. What did your Giovannis and Giacomos talk of in your village out yonder?' Markham pointed towards the clear blue-gray line of the horizon, beyond which lay America, if anything; but he meant distance, and that was enough.

'They talked—about the olives, how they were looking, and if it was going to be a bad or an indifferent year.'

'And then?'

'About the *forestieri*, if many were coming, and whether it would be a good season for the hotels; and about tying up the palms, to make them ready for Easter,' said Frances, resuming, with a smile about her lips. 'And about how old

Pietro's son had got such a good appointment in the post-office, and had bought little Nina a pair of earrings as long as your finger; for he was to marry Nina, you know.'

'Oh, was he? Go on. I am very much interested. Didn't they say Mr. Whatever-his-name-is wanted to get out of it, and that there never would have been any engagement, had not Miss Nina's mother——?'

'Oh Markham,' cried Frances in surprise, 'how could you possibly know?'

'I was reasoning from analogy, Fan. Yes, I suppose they do it all the world over. And it is odd—isn't it?—that, knowing what they are sure to say, we ask them to our houses, and put the keys of all our skeleton cupboards into their hands.'

'Do you think that is true, that dreadful idea about the skeleton? I am sure——'

'What are you sure of, my little dear?'

'I was going to say, oh Markham, that I was sure, *at home*, we had no skeleton; and then I remembered——'

'I understand,' he said kindly. 'It was not a skeleton to speak of, Fan. There is nothing particularly bad about it. If you had met it out walking, you would not have known it for a skeleton. Let us say a mystery, which is not such a mouth-filling word.'

'Sir Thomas told me,' said Frances, with some timidity; 'but I am not sure that I understood. Markham! what was it really about?'

Her voice was low and diffident, and at first he only shook his head. 'About nothing,' he said; 'about—me. Yes, more than anything else, about me. That is how—— No, it isn't,' he added, correcting himself. 'I always must have cared for my mother more than for any woman. She has always been my greatest friend, ever since I can remember anything. We seem to have been children together, and to have grown up together. I was everything to her for a dozen years, and then—your father came between us. He hated me—and I tormented him.'

'He could not hate you, Markham. Oh no, no!'

'My little Fan, how can a child like you understand? Neither did I understand, when I was doing all the mischief.

Between twelve and eighteen I was an imp of mischief, a little demon. It was fun to me to bait that thin-skinned man, that jumped at everything. The explosion was fun to me too. I was a little beast. And then I got the mother to myself again. Don't kill me, my dear. I am scarcely sorry now. We have had very good times since, I with my parent, you with yours—till that day,' he added, flinging away the end of his cigarette, 'when mischief again prompted me to let Con know where he was, which started us all again.'

'Did you always know where we were?' she asked. Strangely enough, this story did not give her any angry feeling towards Markham. It was so far off, and the previous relations of her long-separated father and mother were as a fairy tale to her, confusing and almost incredible, which she did not take into account as matter of fact at all. Markham had delivered these confessions slowly, as they turned and re-turned up and down the lawn. There was not light enough for either to see the expression in the other's face, and the veil of the darkness added to the softening effect. The words came out in short sentences, interrupted by that little business of puffing at the cigarette, letting it go out, stopping to strike a fusee and relight it, which so often forms the byplay of an important conversation, and sometimes breaks the force of painful revelations. Frances followed everything with an absorbed but yet half-dreamy attention, as if the red glow of the light, the exclamation of impatience when the cigarette was found to have gone out, the very perfume of the fusee in the air, were part and parcel of it. And the question she asked was almost mechanical, a part of the business too, striking naturally from the last thing he had said as sparks flew from the perfumed light.

'Not where,' he said. 'But I might have known, had I made any attempt to know. The mother sent her letters through the lawyer, and of course we could have found out. It was thrust upon me at last by one of those meddling fools that go everywhere. And then my old demon got possession of me, and I told Con.' Here he gave a low chuckle, which seemed to escape him in spite of himself. 'I am laughing,' he said—'pay attention, Fan—at myself. Of course I have learned to be sorry for—some things—the imp has put me up to; but I can't get the better of that little demon—or of this little beggar, if you like it better. It's queer phraseology, I suppose; but I prefer the other form.'

'And what,' said Frances in the same dreamy way, drawn on, she was not conscious how, by something in the air, by some current of thought which she was not aware of—'what do you mean to do now?'

He started from her side as if she had given him a blow. 'Do now?' he cried, with something in his voice that shook off the spell of the situation, and aroused the girl at once to the reality of things. She had no guidance of his looks, for, as has been said, she could not see them; but there was a curious thrill in his voice of present alarm and consciousness, as if her innocent question struck sharply against some fact of very different solidity and force from those far-off shadowy facts which he had been telling her. 'Do now? What makes you think I am going to do anything at all?'

His voice fell away in a sort of quaver at the end of these words.

'I do not think it; I—I—don't think anything, Markham; I—don't—know anything.'

'You ask very pat questions all the same, my little Fan. And you have got a pair of very good eyes of your own in that little head. And if you have got any light to throw upon the subject, my dear, produce it; for I'll be bothered if I know.'

Just then, a window opened in the gloom. 'Children,' said Lady Markham's voice, 'are you there? I think I see something like you, though it is so dark. Bring your little sister in, Markham. She must not catch cold on the eve of going back to town.'

'Here is the little thing, mammy. Shall I hand her in to you by the window? It makes me feel very frisky to hear myself addressed as children,' he cried, with his chuckle of easy laughter. 'Here, Fan; run in, my little dear, and be put to bed.'

But he did not go in with her. He kept outside in the quiet cool and freshness of the night, illuminating the dim atmosphere now and then with the momentary glow of another fusee. Frances from her room, to which she had shortly retired, heard the sound, and saw from her windows the sudden ruddy light a great many times before she went to sleep. Markham let his cigar go out oftener than she could reckon. He was too full of thought to remember his cigar.

They arrived in town when everybody was arriving, when even to Frances, in her inexperience, the rising tide was visible in the streets, and the air of a new world beginning, which always marks the commencement of the season. No doubt it is a new world to many virgin souls, though so stale and weary to most of those who tread its endless round. To Frances everything was new; and a sense of the many wonderful things that awaited her got into the girl's head like ethereal wine, in spite of all the grave matters of which she was conscious, which lay under the surface, and were, if not skeletons in the closet, at least very serious drawbacks to anything bright that life could bring. Her knowledge of these drawbacks had been acquired so suddenly, and was so little dulled by habit, that it dwelt upon her mind much more than family mysteries usually dwell upon a mind of eighteen. But yet in the rush and exhilaration of new thoughts and anticipations, always so much more delicately bright than any reality, she forgot that all was not as natural, as pleasant, as happy as it seemed. If Lady Markkam had any consuming cares, she kept them shut away under that smiling countenance, which was as bright and peaceful as the morning. If Markham, on his side, was perplexed and doubtful, he came out and in with the same little chuckle of fun, the same humorous twinkle in his eyes. When these signs of tranquillity are so apparent, the young and ignorant can easily make up their minds that all is well. And Frances was to be 'presented'—a thought which made her heart beat. She was to be put into a court-train and feathers,—she who as yet had never worn anything but the simple frock which she had so pleased herself to think was purely English in its unobtrusiveness and modesty. She was not quite sure that she liked the prospect; but it excited her all the same.

It was early in May, and the train and the court plumes were ready, when, going out one morning upon some small errand of her own, Frances met some one whom she recognised, walking slowly along the long line of Eaton Square. She started at the sight of him, though he did not see her. He was going along with a strange air of reluctance, yet anxiety, glancing up at the houses, no doubt looking for Lady Markham's house, so absorbed that he neither saw Frances nor was disturbed by the startled movement she made, which must have caught a less preoccupied eye. She smiled to herself, after the first start, to see how entirely bent he was upon finding the house, and how little attention he had to spare for anything else. He was even more worn and pale, or rather gray, than he had been when he returned from India, she thought; and there was in him a slackness, a letting-go of himself, a weary look in his step and carriage, which proved, Frances thought, that the Riviera had done George Gaunt little good.

For it was certainly George Gaunt, still in his loose gray Indian clothes, looking like a man dropped from another hemisphere, investigating the numbers on the doors as if he but vaguely comprehended the meaning of them. But that there was in him that unmistakable air of soldier which no mufti can quite disguise, he might have been the Ancient Mariner in person, looking for the man whose fate it is to leave all the wedding-feasts of the world in order to hear that tale. What tale could young Gaunt have to tell? For a moment it flashed across the mind of Frances that he might be bringing bad news, that 'something might have happened,'—that rapid conclusion to which the imagination is so ready to jump. An accident to her father or Constance? so bad, so terrible, that it could not be trusted to a letter, that he had been sent to break the news to them?

She had passed him by this time, being shy, in her surprise, of addressing the stranger all at once; but now she paused, and turned with a momentary intention of running after him and entreating him to tell her the worst. But then Frances recollected that this was impossible; that with the telegraph in active operation, no one would employ such a lingering way of conveying news; and went on again, with her heart beating quicker, with a heightened colour, and a restrained impatience and eagerness of which she was half ashamed. No, she would not turn back before she had done her little business. She did not want either the stranger himself or any one else to divine the flutter of pleasant emotion, the desire she had to see and speak with the son of her old friends. Yes, she said to herself, the son of her old friends—he who was the youngest, whom Mrs. Gaunt used to talk of for hours, whose praises she was never weary of singing.

Frances smiled and blushed to herself as she hurried—perceptibly hurried—about her little affairs. Kind Mrs. Gaunt had always had a secret longing to bring these two together. Frances would not turn back; but she quickened her pace, almost running—as near running as was decorous in London—to the lace-shop, to give the instructions which she had been charged with. No doubt, she said to herself, she would find him there when she got back. She had forgotten, perhaps, the fact that George Gaunt had given very little of his regard to her when he met her, though she was his mother's favourite, and had no eyes but for Constance. This was not a thing to dwell in the mind of a girl who had no jealousy in her, and who never supposed herself to be half as worthy of anybody's attention as Constance was. But, anyhow, she forgot it altogether, forgot to ask herself what in this respect might have happened in the meantime; and with her heart beating full of innocent eagerness, pleasure, and excitement,—full of the hope of hearing about everybody, of seeing again through his eyes the dear little well-known world, which seemed to lie so far behind her,—hastened through her errands, and turned quickly home.

To her great surprise, as she came back, turning round the corner into the long line of pavement, she saw young Gaunt once more approaching her. He looked even more listless and languid now, like a man who had tried to do some duty and failed, and was escaping, glad to be out of the way of it. This was a great deal to read in a man's face; but Frances was highly sympathetic, and divined it, knowing in herself many of those devices of shy people, which shy persons divine. Fortunately she saw him some way off, and had time to overcome her own shyness and take the initiative. She went up to him fresh as the May morning, blushing and smiling, and put out her hand. 'Captain Gaunt?' she said. 'I knew I could not be mistaken. Oh, have you just come from Bordighera? I am so glad to see any one from home!'

'Do you call it home, Miss Waring? Yes, I have just come. I—I—have a number of messages, and some parcels, and—— But I thought you might perhaps be out of town, or busy, and that it would be best to send them.'

'Is that why you are turning your back on my mother's house? or did you not know the number? I saw you before, looking—but I did not like to speak.'

'I—thought you might be out of town,' he repeated, taking no notice of her question; 'and that perhaps the post——'

'Oh no,' cried Frances, whose shyness was of the cordial kind. 'Now you must come back and see mamma. She will want to hear all about Constance. Are they all well, Captain Gaunt? Of course you must have seen them constantly—and Constance. Mamma will want to hear everything.'

'Miss Waring is very well,' he said with a blank countenance; from which he had done his best to dismiss all expression.

'And papa? and dear Mrs. Gaunt, and the colonel, and everybody? Oh, there is so much that letters can't tell. Come back now with me. My mother will be so glad to see you, and Markham; you know Markham already."

Young Gaunt made a feeble momentary resistance. He murmured something about an engagement, about his time being very short; but as he did so, turned round languidly and went with her, obeying, as it seemed, the eager impulse of Frances rather than any will of his own.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

LADY MARKHAM received young Gaunt with the most gracious kindness: had his mother seen him seated in the drawing-room at Eaton Square, with Frances hovering about him full of pleasure and questions, and her mother insisting that he should stay to luncheon, and Markham's hansom just drawing up at the door, she would have thought her boy on the highway to fortune. The sweetness of the two ladies—the happy eagerness of Frances, and Lady Markham's grace and graciousness—had a soothing effect upon the young man. He had been unwilling to come, as he was unwilling to go anywhere at this crisis of his life; but it soothed him, and filled him with a sort of painful and bitter pleasure to be thus surrounded by all that was most familiar to Constance,—by her mother and sister, and all their questions about her. These questions, indeed, it was hard upon him to be obliged to answer; but yet that pain was the best thing that now remained to him, he said to himself. To hear her name, and all those allusions to her, to be in the rooms where she had spent her life—all this gave food to his longing fancy, and wrung, yet soothed, his heart.

'My dear, you will worry Captain Gaunt with your questions; and I don't know those good people, Tasie and the rest: you must let me have my turn now. Tell me about my daughter, Captain Gaunt. She is not a very good correspondent. She gives few details of her life; and it must be so very different from life here. Does she seem to enjoy herself? Is she happy and bright? I have longed so much to see some one, impartial, whom I could ask.'

Impartial! If they only knew! 'She is always bright,' he said with a suppressed passion, the meaning of which Frances divined suddenly, almost with a cry, with a start and thrill of sudden certainty, which took away her breath. 'But happy, I cannot tell. It is not good enough for her, out there.'

'No? Thank you, Captain Gaunt, for appreciating my child. I was afraid it was not much of a sphere for her. What company has she? Is there anything going on——?'

'Mamma,' said Frances, 'I told you—there is never anything going on.'

The young soldier shook his head. 'There is no society —except the Durants—and ourselves—who are not interesting,' he said, with a somewhat ghastly smile.

'The Durants are the clergyman's family?—and yourselves. I think she might have been worse off. I am sure Mrs. Gaunt has been kind to my wayward girl,' she said, looking him in the face with that charming smile.

'Kind!' he cried, as if the word were a profanation. 'My mother is too happy to do—anything. But Miss Waring,' he added with a feeble smile, 'has little need of—any one. She has so many resources—she is so far above——'

He got inarticulate here, and stumbled in his speech, growing very red. Frances watched him under her eyelids with a curious sensation of pain. He was very much in earnest, very sad, yet transported out of his langour and misery by Constance's name. Now Frances had heard of George Gaunt for years, and had unconsciously allowed her thoughts to dwell upon him, as has been mentioned in another part of this history. His arrival, had it not happened in the midst of other excitements which preoccupied her, would have been one of the greatest excitements she had ever known. She remembered now that when it did happen, there had been a faint, almost imperceptible, touch of disappointment in it, in the fact that his whole attention was given to Constance, and that for herself, Frances, he had no eyes. But in the moment of seeing him again she had forgotten all that, and had gone back to her previous prepossession in his favour, and his mother's certainty that Frances and her George would be 'great friends.' Now she understood with instant divination the whole course of affairs. He had given his heart to Constance, and she had not prized the gift. The discovery gave her an acute, yet vague (if that could be), impression of pain. It was she, not Constance, that had been prepossessed in his favour. Had Constance not been there, no doubt she would have been thrown much into the society of George Gaunt—and—who could tell what might have happened? All this came before her like the sudden opening of a landscape hid by fog and mists. Her eyes swept over it, and then it was gone. And this was what never had been, and never would be.

'Poor Con,' said Lady Markham. 'She never was thrown on her own resources before. Has she so many of them? It must be a curiously altered life for her, when she has to fall back upon what you call her resources. But you think she is happy?' she asked with a sigh.

How could he answer? The mere fact that she was Constance seemed to Gaunt a sort of paradise. If she could make him happy by a look or a word, by permitting him to be near her, how was it possible that, being herself, she could be otherwise than blessed? He was well enough aware that there was a flaw in his logic somewhere, but his mind was not strong enough to perceive where that flaw was.

Markham came in in time to save him from the difficulty of an answer. Markham did not recollect the young man, whom he had only seen once; but he hailed him with great friendliness, and began to inquire into his occupations and engagements. 'If you have nothing better to do, you must come and dine with me at my club,' he said in the kindest way, for which Frances was very grateful to her brother. And young Gaunt, for his part, began to gather himself together a little. The presence of a man roused him. There is something, no doubt, seductive and relaxing in the fact of being surrounded by sympathetic women, ready to divine and to console. He had not braced himself to bear the pain of their questions; but somehow had felt a certain luxury in letting his despondency, his languor, and displeasure with life appear. 'I have to be here,' he had said to them, 'to see people, I believe. My father thinks it necessary: and I could not stay; that is, my people are leaving Bordighera. It becomes too hot to hold one—they say.'

'But you would not feel that, coming from India?'

'I came to get braced up,' he said with a smile, as of self-ridicule, and made a little pause. 'I have not succeeded very well in that,' he added presently. 'They think England will do me more good. I go back to India in a year; so that, if I can be braced up, I should not lose any time.'

'You should go to Scotland, Captain Gaunt. I don't mean at once, but as soon as you are tired of the season—that is the place to brace you up—or to Switzerland, if you like that better.'

'I do not much care,' he had said with another melancholy smile, 'where I go.'

The ladies tried every way they could think of to console him, to give him a warmer interest in his life. They told him that when he was feeling stronger, his spirits would come back. 'I know how one runs down when one feels out of sorts,' Lady Markham said. 'You must let us try to amuse you a little, Captain Gaunt.'

But when Markham appeared, this softness came to an end. George Gaunt picked himself up, and tried to look like a man of the world. He had to see some one at the Horse Guards, and he had some relations to call upon; but he would be very glad, he said, to dine with Lord Markham. It surprised Frances that her mother did not appear to look with any pleasure on this engagement. She even interposed in a way which was marked. 'Don't you think, Markham, it would be better if Captain Gaunt and you dined with *me?* Frances is not half satisfied. She has not asked half her questions. She has the first right to an old friend.'

'Gaunt is not going away to-morrow,' said Markham. 'Besides, if he's out of sorts, he wants amusing, don't you see?'

'And we are not capable of doing that! Frances, do you hear?'

'Very capable, in your way. But for a man, when he's low, ladies are dangerous—that's my opinion, and I've a good deal of experience.'

'Of low spirits, Markham!'

'No, but of ladies,' he said with a chuckle. 'I shall take him somewhere afterwards; to the play perhaps, or—somewhere amusing: whereas you would talk to him all night, and Fan would ask him questions, and keep him on the same level.'

Lady Markham made a reply which to Frances sounded very strange. She said, 'To the play—perhaps?' in a doubtful tone, looking at her son. Gaunt had been sitting looking on in the embarrassed and helpless way in which a man naturally regards a discussion over his own body as it were, particularly if it is a conflict of kindness, and, glad to be delivered from this friendly duel, turned to Frances with some observation, taking no heed of Lady Markham's remark. But Frances heard it with a confused premonition which she could not understand. She could not understand, and yet—— She saw Markham shrug his shoulders in reply; there was a slight colour upon his face, which ordinarily knew none. What did they both mean?

But how elated would Mrs. Gaunt have been, how pleased the General, had they seen their son at Lady Markham's luncheon-table, in the midst, so to speak, of the first society! Sir Thomas came in to lunch, as he had a way of doing; and so did a gay young Guardsman, who was indeed naturally a little contemptuous of a man in the line, yet civil to Markham's friend. These simple old people would have thought their George on the way to every advancement, and believed even the heartbreak which had procured him that honour well compensated. These were far from his own sentiments; yet, to feel himself thus warmly received by '*her* people,' the object of so much kindness, which his deluded heart whispered must surely, surely, whatever she might intend, have been suggested at least by something she had said of him, was balm and healing to his wounds. He looked at her mother—and indeed Lady Markham was noted for her graciousness, and for looking as if she meant to be the motherly friend of all who approached her—with a sort of adoration. To be the mother of Constance, and yet to speak to ordinary mortals with that smile, as if she had no more to be proud of than they! And what could it be that made her so kind? not anything in him—a poor soldier, a poor soldier's son, knowing nothing but the exotic society of India and its curious ways—surely something which, out of some relenting of the heart, some pity or regret, Constance had said. Frances sat next to him at table, and there was a more subtle satisfaction still in speaking low, aside to Frances, when he got a little confused with the general conversation, that bewildering talk which was all made up of allusions. He told her that he had brought a parcel from the Palazzo, and a box of flowers from the bungalow,—that his mother was very anxious to hear from her, that they were going to Switzerland—no, not coming home this year. 'They have found a cheap place in which my mother delights,' he said, with a faint smile. He did not tell her that his coming home a little circumscribed their resources, and that the month in town which they were so anxious he should have, which in other circumstances he would have enjoyed so much, but which now he cared nothing for, nor for anything, was the reason why they had stopped half-way on their usual summer journey to England. Dear old people, they had done it for him—this was what he thought to himself, though he did not say it—for him, for whom nobody could now do anything! He did not say much, but as he looked in Frances' sympathetic eyes, he felt that, without saying a word to her, she must understand it all.

Lady Markham made no remark about their visitor until after they had done their usual afternoon's 'work,' as it was her habit to call it—their round of calls, to which she went in an exact succession, saying lightly, as she cut short each visit, that she could stay no longer, as she had so much to do.

There was always a shop or two to go to, in addition to the calls, and almost always some benevolent errand—some Home to visit, some hospital to call at, something about the work of poor ladies, or the salvation of poor girls,—all these were included along with the calls in the afternoon's work. And it was not till they had returned home and were seated together at tea, refreshing themselves after their labours, that she mentioned young Gaunt. She then said, after a minute's silence, suddenly, as if the subject had been long in her mind, 'I wish Markham had let that young man alone; I wish he had left him to you and me.'

Frances started a little, and felt, with great self-indignation and distress, that she blushed—though why, she could not tell. She looked up, wondering, and said, 'Markham! I thought it was so very kind.'

'Yes, my dear; I believe he means to be kind.'

'Oh, I am sure he does; for he could have no interest in George Gaunt—not for himself. I thought it was perhaps for my sake, because he was—because he was the son of—such a friend.'

'Were they so good to you, Frances? And no doubt to Con too.'

'I am sure of it, mamma.'

'Poor people,' said Lady Markham; 'and this is the reward they get. Con has been experimenting on that poor boy. What do I mean by experimenting? You know well enough what I mean, Frances. I suppose he was the only man at hand, and she has been amusing herself. He has been dangling about her constantly, I have no doubt, and she has made him believe that she liked it as well as he did. And then he has made a declaration, and there has been a scene. I am sorry to say I need no evidence in this case: I know all about it. And now, Markham! Poor people, I say: it would have been well for them if they had never seen one of our race.'

'Mamma!' cried Frances, with a little indignation, 'I feel sure you are misjudging Constance. Why should she do anything so cruel? Papa used to say that one must have a motive.'

'*He* said so! I wonder if he could tell what motives were his when—— Forgive me, my dear. We will not discuss your father. As for Con, her motives are clear enough—

amusement. Now, my dear, don't. I know you were going to ask me, with your innocent face, what amusement it could possibly be to break that young man's heart. The greatest in the world, my love! We need not mince matters between ourselves. There is nothing that diverts Con so much, and many another woman. You think it is terrible; but it is true.'

'I think—you must be mistaken,' said Frances, pale and troubled, with a little gasp as for breath. 'But,' she went on, 'supposing even that you were right about Con, what could Markham do?'

Lady Markham looked at her very gravely. 'He has asked this poor young fellow—to dinner,' she said.

Frances could scarcely restrain a laugh, which was half hysterical. 'That does not seem very tragic,' she said.

'Oh no, it does not seem very tragic—poor people, poor people!' said Lady Markham, shaking her head.

And there was no more; for a visitor appeared—one of a little circle of ladies who came in and out every day—intimates who rushed up-stairs and into the room without being announced, always with something to say about the Home, or the Hospital, or the Reformatory, or the Poor Ladies, or the endangered girls. There was always a great deal to talk over about these institutions, which formed an important part of the 'work' which all these ladies had to do. Frances withdrew to a little distance, so as not to embarrass her mother and her friend, who were discussing 'cases' for one of those refuges of suffering humanity, and were more comfortable when she was out of hearing. Frances knitted and thought of home—not this bewildering version of it, but the quiet of the idle village life where there was no 'work,' but where all were neighbours, lending a kindly hand to each other in trouble, and where the tranquil days flew by she knew not how. She thought of this with a momentary, oft-recurring secret protest against this other life, of which, as was natural, she saw the evil more clearly than the good; and then, with a bound, her thoughts returned to the extraordinary question to which her mother had made so extraordinary a reply. What could Markham do? 'He has asked the poor young fellow to dinner.' Even now, in the midst of the painful confusion of her mind, she almost laughed. Asked him to dinner! How would that harm him? At

Markham's club there would be no poisoned dishes—nothing that would slay. What harm could it do to George Gaunt to dine with Markham? She asked herself the question again and again, but could find no reply. When she turned to the other side and thought of Constance, the blood rushed to her head with a feverish angry pang. Was that also true? But in this case, Frances, like her mother, felt that no doubt was possible. In this respect she had been able to understand what her mother said to her. Her heart bled for the poor people, whom Lady Markham compassionated without knowing them, and wondered how Mrs. Gaunt would bear the sight of the girl who had been cruel to her son. All that, with agitation and trouble she could believe: but Markham! What could Markham do?

She was going to the play with her mother that evening, which was to Frances, fresh to every real enjoyment, one of the greatest of pleasures. But she did not enjoy it that night. Lady Markham paid little attention to the play: she studied the people as they went and came, which was a usual weakness of hers, much wondered at and deplored by Frances, to whom the stage was the centre of attraction. But on this occasion Lady Markham was more *distraite* than ever, levelling her glass at every new group that appeared in the recesses between the acts,—the restless crowd, which is always in motion. Her face, when she removed the glass from it, was anxious, and almost unhappy. 'Frances,' she said, in one of these pauses, 'your eyes must be sharper than mine; try if you can see Markham anywhere.'

'Here is Markham,' said her son, opening the door of the box. 'What does the mother want with me, Fan?'

'Oh, you are here!' Lady Markham cried, leaning back in her chair with a sigh of relief. 'And Captain Gaunt too.'

'Quite safe, and out of the way of mischief,' said Markham with a chuckle, which brought the colour to his mother's cheek.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

AFTER this, for about a fortnight, Captain Gaunt was very often visible in Eaton Square. He dined next evening with Lady Markham and Frances—Sir Thomas, who scarcely counted, he was so often there, being the only other guest. Sir Thomas was a man who had a great devotion for Lady Markham, and a very distant link of cousinship, which, or something in themselves which made that impossible, had silenced any remark of gossip, much less scandal, upon their friendship. He came in to luncheon whenever it pleased him; he dined there—when he was not dining anywhere else. But as both he and Lady Markham had many engagements, this was not too often the case, though there was rarely an evening, if the ladies were at home, when Sir Thomas did not 'look in.' His intimacy was like that of a brother in the cheerful easy house. This cheerful company, the friendliness, the soothing atmosphere of feminine sympathy around him, and underneath all the foolish hope, more sweet than anything else, that a certain relenting on the part of Constance must be underneath, took away the gloom and dejection, in great part at least, from the young soldier's looks. He exerted himself to please the people who were so kind to him, and his melancholy smile had begun to brighten into something more natural. Frances, for her part, thought him a very delightful addition to the party. She looked at him across the table almost with the pride which a sister might have felt when he made a good appearance and did himself credit. He seemed to belong to her more or less,—to reflect upon her the credit which he gained. It showed that her friends after all were worth thinking of, that they were not unworthy of the admiration she had for them, that they were able to hold their own in what the people here called Society and the world. She raised her little animated face to young Gaunt, was the first to see what he meant, unconsciously interpreted or explained for him when he was hazy—and beamed with delight when Lady Markham was interested and amused. Poor Frances was not always quite clever enough to see when it happened that the two elders were amused by the man himself, rather than by what he said—and her gratification was great in his success. She herself had never aspired to success in her own person; but it was a great pleasure to her that the little community at Bordighera should be vindicated and put in the best light. 'They will never be able to say to me *now* that we had no Society, that we saw nobody,' Frances said to herself—attributing, however, a far greater brilliancy to poor George than he ever possessed. He fell back into melancholy, however, when the ladies left, and Sir Thomas found him dull. He had very little to say about Waring, on whose behalf the benevolent baronet was so much interested.

'Do you think he shows any inclination towards home?' Sir Thomas asked.

'I am sure,' young Gaunt answered, with a solemn face, 'that there is nothing there that can satisfy such a creature as that.'

'He has no society, then?' asked Sir Thomas.

'Oh, Society! it is like the poem,' said the young man, with a sigh. 'I should think it would be so everywhere. 'Ye common people of the sky, what are ye when your queen is nigh?'

Sir Thomas had been much puzzled by the application to Waring, as he supposed, of the phrase, 'such a creature as that;' but now he perceived, with a compassionate shake of his head, what the poor young fellow meant. Con had been at her tricks again! He said, with the pitying look which such a question warranted, 'I suppose you are very fond of poetry?'

'No,' said the young soldier, astonished, looking at him suddenly. 'Oh no. I am afraid I am very ignorant; but sometimes it expresses what nothing else can express. Don't you think so?'

'I think perhaps it is time to join the ladies,' Sir Thomas said. He was sorry for the boy, though a little contemptuous too; but then he himself had known Con and her tricks from her cradle, and those of many another, and he was hardened. He thought their mothers had been far more attractive women.

Was it the same art which made Frances look up with that bright look of welcome, and almost affectionate interest, when they returned to the drawing-room? Sir Thomas liked her so much, that he hoped it was not merely one of their tricks; then paused, and said to himself that it would be better if it were so, and not that the girl had really taken a fancy to this young fellow, whose heart and head were both full of another, and who, even without that, would evidently be a very poor thing for Lady Markham's daughter. Sir Thomas was so far unjust to Frances, that he concluded it must be one of her tricks, when he recollected how complacent she had been to Claude Ramsay, finding places for him where he could sit out of the draught. They were all like that, he said to himself; but concluded that, as one nail drives out another, a second 'affair,' if he could be drawn into it, might cure the victim. This rapid *résumé* of all the circumstances, present and future, is a thing which may well take place in an experienced mind in the moment of entering a room in which there are materials for the development of a new chapter in the social drama. The conclusion he came to led him to the side of Lady Markham, who was writing the address upon one of her many notes. 'It is to Nelly Winterbourn,' she explained, 'to inquire—— You know they have dragged that poor sufferer up to town, to be near the best advice; and he is lying more dead than alive.'

'Perhaps it is not very benevolent, so far as he is concerned; but I hope he'll linger a long time,' said Sir Thomas.

'Oh, so do I! These imbroglios may go on for a long time and do nobody any harm. But when a horrible crisis comes, and one feels that they must be cleared up!' It was evident that in this Lady Markham was not specially considering the sufferings of poor Mr. Winterbourn.

'What does Markham say?' Sir Thomas asked.

'Say! He does not say anything. He shuffles—you know the way he has. He never could stand still upon both of his feet.'

'And you can't guess what he means to do?'

'I think—— But who can tell? even with one whom I know so intimately as Markham. I don't say even in my son, for that does not tell for very much.'

'Nothing at all,' said the social philosopher.

'Oh, a little, sometimes. I believe to a certain extent in a kind of magnetic sympathy. You don't, I know. I think, then, so far as I can make out, that Markham would rather do nothing at all. He likes the *status quo* well enough. But then he is only one; and the other—one cannot tell how she might feel.'

'Nelly is the unknown quantity,' said Sir Thomas; and then Lady Markham sent away, by the hands of the footman, her anxious affectionate little billet 'to inquire.'

Meanwhile young Gaunt sat down by Frances. On the table near them there was a glorious show of crimson—the great dazzling red anemones, the last of the season, which Mrs. Gaunt had sent. It had been very difficult to find them so late on, he told her; they had hunted into the coolest corners where the spring flowers lingered the longest, his mother quite anxious about it, climbing into the little valleys among the hills. 'For you know what you are to my mother,' he said, with a smile, and then a sigh. Mrs. Gaunt had often made disparaging comparisons—comparisons how utterly out of the question! He allowed to himself that this candid countenance, so open and simple, and so full of sympathy, had a charm—more than he could have believed; but yet to make a comparison between this sister and the other! Nevertheless it was very consolatory, after the effort he had made at dinner, to lay himself back in the soft low chair, with his long limbs stretched out, and talk or be talked to, no longer with any effort, with a softening tenderness towards the mother who loved Frances, but with whom he had had many scenes before he left her, in frantic defence of the woman who had broken his heart.

'Mrs. Gaunt was always so kind to me,' Frances said, gratefully, a little moisture starting into her eyes. 'At the Durants' there seemed always a little comparison with Tasie; but with your mother there was no comparison.'

'A comparison with Tasie!' He laughed in spite of himself. 'Nothing can be so foolish as these comparisons,' he added, not thinking of Tasie.

'Yes, she was older,' said Frances. 'She had a right to be more clever. But it was always delightful at the bungalow, Does my father go there often now?'

'Did he ever go often?'

'N-no,' said Frances, hesitating; 'but sometimes in the evening. I hope Constance makes him go out. I used to have to worry him, and often get scolded. No, not scolded—that was not his way; but sent off with a sharp word. And then he would relent, and come out.'

'I have not seen very much of Mr. Waring,' Gaunt said.

'Then what does Constance do? Oh, it must be such a change for her! I could not have imagined such a change. I can't help thinking sometimes it is a great pity that I, who was not used to it, nor adapted for it, should have all this—and Constance, who likes it, who suits it, should be—banished; for it must be a sort of banishment for her, don't you think?'

'I—suppose so. Yes, there could be no surroundings too bright for her,' he said, dreamily. He seemed to see her, notwithstanding, walking with him up into the glades of the olive-gardens, with her face so bright. Surely she had not felt her banishment then! Or was it only that the amusement of breaking his heart made up for it, for the moment, as his mother said?

'Fancy,' said Frances; 'I am going to court on Monday—I—in a train and feathers. What would they all say? But all the time I am feeling like the daw in the peacock's plumes. They seem to belong to Constance. She would wear them as if she were a queen herself. She would not perhaps object to be stared at; and she would be admired.'

'Oh yes!'

'She was, they say, when she was presented, so much admired. She might have been a maid of honour; but mamma would not. And I, a poor little brown sparrow, in all the fine feathers—I feel inclined to call out, 'I am only Frances.' But that is not needed, is it, when any one looks at me?' she said, with a laugh. She had met with nobody with whom she could be confidential among all her new acquaintances. And George Gaunt was a new acquaintance too, if she had but remembered; but there was in him something which she had been used to, something with which she was familiar, a breath of her former life—and that acquaintance with his name and all about him which makes one feel like an old friend. She had expected for so many years to see him, that it appeared to her imagination as if she had known him all these years—as if there was scarcely any one with whom she was so familiar in the world.

He looked at her attentively as she spoke, a little touched, a little charmed by this instinctive delicate familiarity, in which he at last, having so lately come out of the hands of a true operator, saw, whatever Sir Thomas might think, that it was not one of their tricks. She did not want any compliment from him, even had he been capable of giving it. She was as sincere as the day, as little troubled about her inferiority as she was convinced of it; the laugh with which she spoke had in it a genuine tone of innocent youthful mirth, such as had not been heard in that house for long. The exhilarating ring of it, so spontaneous, so gay, reached Lady Markham and Sir Thomas in their colloquy, and roused them. Frances herself had never laughed like that before. Her mother gave a glance towards her, smiling. 'The little thing has found her own character in the sight of her old friend,' she said; and then rounded her little epigram with a sigh.

'The young fellow ought to think much of himself to have two of them taking that trouble.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said Lady Markham. 'Do you think she is taking trouble? She does not understand what it means.'

'Do any of them not understand what it means?' asked Sir Thomas. He had a large experience in Society, and thought he knew; but he had little experience out of Society, and so, perhaps, did not. There are some points in which a woman's understanding is the best.

The evening had not been unpleasant to any one, not even, perhaps, to the lovelorn, when Markham appeared, coming back from his dinner-party, a signal to the other gentlemen that it was time for them to disappear from theirs. He gave his mother the last news of Winterbourn; and he told Sir Thomas that a division was expected, and that he ought to be in the House. 'The poor sufferer' was sinking slowly, Markham said. It was quite impossible now to think of the operation which might perhaps have saved him three months since. His sister was with Nelly, who had neither mother nor sister of her own; and the long-expected event was thus to come off decorously, with all the proper accessories.

It was a very important matter for two at least of the speakers; but this was how they talked of it, hiding, perhaps, the anxiety within. Then Markham turned to the other group.

'Have you got all the feathers and the furbelows ready?' he said. 'Do you think there will be any of you visible through them, little Fan?'

'Don't frighten the child, Markham. She will do very well. She can be as steady as a little rock: and in that case it doesn't matter that she is not tall.

'Oh, tall—as if that were necessary! You are not tall yourself, our mother; but you are a very majestic person when you are in your war-paint.'

'There's the Queen herself, for that matter,' said Sir Thomas. 'See her in a procession, and she might be six feet. I feel a mouse before her.' He had held once some post about the court, and had a right to speak.

'Let us hope Fan will look majestic too. You should, to carry off the effect I shall produce. In ordinary life,' said Markham, 'I don't flatter myself that I am an Adonis; but you should see me screwed up into a uniform. No, I'm not in the army, Fan. What is my uniform, mother, to please her? A Deputy Lieutenant, or something of that sort. I hope you are a great deal the wiser, Fan.'

'People always look well in uniform,' said Frances, looking at him somewhat doubtfully, on which Markham broke forth into his chuckle. 'Wait till you see me, my little dear. Wait till the little boys see me on the line of route. They are the true tests of personal attraction. Are you coming, Gaunt? Do you feel inclined to give those fellows their revenge?'

Markham had spoken rather low, and at some distance from his mother; but the word caught her quick ear.

'Revenge? What do you mean by revenge? Who is going to be revenged?' she cried.

'Nobody is going to fight a duel, if that is what you mean,' said Markham, quietly turning round. 'Gaunt has, for as simple as he stands there, beaten me at billiards, and I can't stand under the affront. Didn't you lick me, Gaunt?'

'It was an accident,' said Gaunt. 'If that is all, you are very welcome to your revenge.'

'Listen to his modesty, which, by the by, shows a little want of tact; for am I the man to be beaten by an accident?' said Markham, with his chuckle of self-ridicule. 'Come along, Gaunt.'

Lady Markham detained Sir Thomas with a look as he rose to accompany them. She gave Captain Gaunt her hand, and a gracious, almost anxious smile. 'Markham is noted for bad hours,' she said. 'You are not very strong, and you must not let him beguile you into his evil ways.' She rose too, and took Sir Thomas by the arm as the young man went away. 'Did you hear what he said? Do you think it was only billiards he meant? My heart quakes for that poor boy and the poor people he belongs to. Don't you think you could go after them and see what they are about?'

'I will do anything you please. But what good could I do?' said Sir Thomas. 'Markham would not put up with any interference from me—nor the other young fellow either, for that matter'

'But if you were there, if they saw you about, it would restrain them: oh, you have always been such a true friend. If you were but there.'

'There: where?' There came before the practical mind of Sir Thomas a vision of himself, at his sober age, dragged into he knew not what nocturnal haunts, like an elderly spectre, jeered at by the pleasure-makers. 'I will do anything to please you,' he said, helplessly. 'But what can I do? It would be of no use. You know yourself that interference never does any good.'

Frances stood by aghast, listening to this conversation. What did it mean? Of what was her mother afraid? Presently Lady Markham took her seat again, with a return to her usual smiling calm. 'You are right, and I am wrong,' she said. 'Of course we can do nothing. Perhaps, as you say, there is no real reason for anxiety.' (Frances observed, however, that Sir Thomas had not said this.) 'It is because the boy is not well off, and his people are not well off—old soldiers, with their pensions and their savings. That is what makes me fear.'

'Oh, if that is the case, you need have the less alarm. Where there's not much to lose, the risks are lessened,' Sir Thomas said, calmly.

When he too was gone, Frances crept close to her mother.

She knelt down beside the chair on which Lady Markham sat, grave and pale, with agitation in her face. 'Mother,' she whispered, taking her hand and pressing her cheek against it, 'Markham is so kind—he never would do poor George any harm.'

'Oh, my dear,' cried Lady Markham, 'how can you tell? Markham is not a man to be read off like a book. He is very kind—which does not hinder him from being cruel too. He means no harm, perhaps; but when the harm is done, what does it matter whether he meant it or not? And as for the risks being lessened because your friend is poor, that only means that he is despatched all the sooner. Markham is like a man with a fever: he has his fits of play, and one of them is on him now.'

'Do you mean—gambling?' said Frances, growing pale too. She did not know very well what gambling was, but it was ruin, she had always heard.

'Don't let us talk of it,' said Lady Markham. 'We can do no good; and to distress ourselves for what we cannot prevent is the worst policy in the world, everybody says. You had better go to bed, dear child; I have some letters to write.'

## CHAPTER XXXV

GAUNT did not appear again at Eaton Square for two or three days,—not, indeed, till after the great event of Frances' history had taken place—the going to court, which had filled her with so many alarms. After all, when she got there, she was not frightened at all, the sense of humour which was latent in her nature getting the mastery at the last moment, and the spectacle, such as it was, taking all her attention from herself. Lady Markham's good taste had selected for Frances as simple a dress as was possible, and her ornaments were the pearls which her aunt had given her, which she had never been able to look at, save uneasily, as spoil. Mrs. Clarendon, however, condescended, which was a wonderful stretch of good-nature, to come to Eaton Square to see her dressed, which, as everybody knows, is one of the most agreeable parts of the ceremony. Frances had not a number of young friends to fill the house with a chorus of admiration and criticism; but the Miss Montagues thought it 'almost a duty' to come, and a number of her mother's friends. These ladies filled the drawing-room, and were much more formidable than even the eyes of Majesty, preoccupied with the sight of many toilets, and probably very tired of them, which would have no more than a passing glance for Frances. The spectators at Eaton Square took her to pieces conscientiously, though they agreed, after each had made her little observation, that the *ensemble* was perfect, and that the power of millinery could no further go. The intelligent reader needs not to be informed that Frances was all white, from her feathers to her shoes. Her pretty glow of youthfulness and expectation made the toilet supportable, nay, pretty, even in the glare of day. Markham, who was not afraid to confront all these fair and critical faces, in his uniform, which misbecame, and did not even fit him, and which made his insignificance still more apparent, walked round and round his little sister with the most perfect satisfaction. 'Are you sure you know how to manage that train, little Fan? Do you feel quite up to to your curtsey?' he said in a whisper with his chuckle of mirth; but there was a very tender look in the little man's eyes. He might wrong others; but to Frances, nobody could be more kind or considerate. Mrs. Clarendon, when she saw him, turned upon her heel and walked off into the back drawing-room, where she stood for some minutes sternly contemplating a picture, and ignoring everybody. Markham did not resent this insult. 'She can't abide me, Fan,' he went on. 'Poor lady, I don't wonder. I was a little brat when she knew me first. As soon as I go away, she will come back; and I am going presently, my dear. I am going to snatch a morsel in the dining-room, to sustain nature. I hope you had your sandwiches, Fan? It will take a great deal of nourishment to keep you up to that curtsey.' He patted her softly on her white shoulder, with kindness beaming out of his ugly face. 'I call you a most satisfactory production, my dear. Not a beauty, but better—a real nice innocent girl. I should like any fellow to show me a nicer,' he went on with his short laugh. Though it took the form of a chuckle, there was something in it that showed Markham's heart was touched. And this was the man whom even his own mother was afraid to trust a young man with! It seemed to Frances that it was impossible such a thing could be true.

Mrs. Clarendon, as Markham had predicted, came back as he retired. Her contemplation of the dress of the *débutante* was very critical. 'Satin is too heavy for you,' she said. 'I wonder your mother did not see that silk would have been far more in keeping; but she always liked to overdo. As for my Lord Markham, I am glad he will have to look after your mother, and not you, Frances; for the very look of a man like that contaminates a young girl. Don't say to me that he is your brother, for he is not your brother. Considering my age and yours, I surely ought to know best. Turn round a little. There is a perceptible crease across the middle of your shoulder, and I don't quite like the hang of this skirt. But one thing looks very well, and that is your pearls. They have been in the family I can't tell you how long. My grandmother gave them to me.'

'Mamma insisted I should wear them, and nothing else, aunt Caroline.'

'Yes, I daresay. You have nothing else good enough to go with them, most likely. And Lady Markham knows a good thing very well when she sees it. Have you been put through all that you have to do, Frances? Remember to keep your right hand quite free; and take care your train doesn't get in your way. Oh, why is it that your poor father is not here to see you, to go with you! It would be a very different thing then.'

'Nothing would make papa go, aunt Caroline. Do you think he would dress himself up like Markham, to be laughed at?'

'I promise you nobody would laugh at my brother,' said Mrs. Clarendon. 'As for Lord Markham——' But she bit her lip, and forbore. She spoke to none of the other ladies, who swarmed like numerous bees in the room, keeping up a hum in the air; but she made very formal acknowledgments to Lady Markham as she went away. 'I am much obliged to you for letting me come to see Frances dressed. She looks very well on the whole, though, perhaps, I should have adopted a different style had it been in my hands.'

'My dear Caroline,' cried Lady Markham, ignoring this ungracious conclusion, 'how can you speak of letting you come? You know we are only too glad to see you whenever you will come. And I hoped you liked the effect of your beautiful pearls. What a charming present to give the child; I thought it so kind of you.'

'So long as Frances understands that they are family ornaments,' said Mrs. Clarendon, stiffly, rejecting all acknowledgments.

There was a little murmur and titter when she went away. 'Is it Medusa in person?' 'It is Mrs. Clarendon, the wife of the great Q.C.' 'It is Frances' aunt, and she does not like any remark.' 'It is my dear sister-in-law,' said Lady Markham. 'She does not love me; but she is kind to Frances, which covers a multitude of sins.' 'And very rich,' said another lady, 'which covers a multitude more.' This put a little bitterness into the conversation to Frances, standing there in her fine clothes, and not knowing how to interfere; and it was a relief to her when Markham, though she could not blame the whispering girls who called him a guy, came in shuffling and smiling, with a glance and nod of encouragement to his little sister to take the mother down-stairs to her carriage. After that, all was a moving phantasmagoria of colour and novel life, and nothing clear.

And it was not until after this great day that Captain Gaunt appeared again. The ladies received him with reproaches for his absence. 'I expected to see you yesterday at least,' said Lady Markham. 'You don't care for fine clothes, as we women do; but five o'clock tea, after a Drawing-room, is a fine sight. You have no idea how grand we were, and how much you have lost.'

Captain Gaunt responded with a very grave, indeed melancholy smile. He was even more dejected than when he made his first appearance. Then his melancholy had been unalloyed, and not without something of that tragic satisfaction in his own sufferings which the victims of the heart so often enjoy. But now there were complications of some kind, not so easily to be understood. He smiled a very serious evanescent smile.

'I shall have to lose still more,' he said, 'for I think I must leave London—sooner than I thought.'

'Oh,' cried Frances, whom this concerned the most; 'leave London! You were to stay a month.'

'Yes; but my month seems to have run away before it has begun,' he said, confusedly. Then, finding Lady Markham's eye upon him, he added, 'I mean, things are very different from what I expected. My father thought I might do myself good by seeing people who—might push me, he supposed. I am not good at pushing myself,' he said, with an abrupt and harsh laugh.

'I understand that. You are too modest. It is a defect, as well as the reverse one of being too bold. And you have not met—the people you hoped?'

'It is not exactly that either. My father's old friends have been kind enough; but London perhaps is not the place for a poor soldier.' He stopped, with again a little quiver of a smile.

'That is quite true,' said Lady Markham, gravely. 'I enter into your feelings. You don't think that the game is worth the candle? I have heard so many people say so—even among those who were very well able to push themselves, Captain Gaunt. I have heard them say that any little thing they might have gained was not worth the expenditure and trouble of a season in London—besides all the risks.'

Captain Gaunt listened to this with his discouraged look. He made no reply to Lady Markham, but turned to Frances with a sort of smile. 'Do you remember,' he said, 'I told you my mother had found a cheap place in Switzerland, such as she delights in? I think I shall go and join them there.'

'Oh, I am very sorry,' said Frances, with a countenance of unfeigned regret. 'No doubt Mrs. Gaunt will be glad to have you; but she will be sorry too. Don't you think she would rather you stayed your full time in London, and enjoyed yourself a little? I feel sure she would like that best.'

'But I don't think I am enjoying myself,' he said, with the air of a man who would like to be persuaded. He had perhaps been a little piqued by Lady Markham's way of taking him at his word.

'There must be a great deal to enjoy,' said Frances; 'every one says so. They think there is no place like London. You cannot have exhausted everything in a week, Captain Gaunt. You have not given it a fair trial. Your mother and the General, they would not like you to run away.'

'Run away! no,' he said, with a little start; 'that is what I should not do.'

'But it would be running away,' said Frances, with all the zeal of a partisan. 'You think you are not doing any good, and you forget that they wished you to have a little pleasure too. They think a great deal of London. The General used to talk to me, when I thought I should never see it. He used to tell me to wait till I had seen London; everything was there. And it is not often you have the chance, Captain Gaunt. It may be a long time before you come from India again; and think if you told any one out there you had only been a week in town!'

He listened to her very devoutly, with an air of giving great weight to those simple arguments. They were more soothing to his pride, at least, than the way in which her mother took him at his word.

'Frances speaks,' said Lady Markham—and while she spoke, the sound of Markham's hansom was heard dashing up to the door—'Frances speaks as if she were in the interest of all the people who prey upon visitors in London. I think, on the whole, Captain Gaunt, though I regret your going, that my reason is with you rather than with her. And, my dear, if Captain Gaunt thinks this is right, it is not for his friends to persuade him against his better judgment.'

'What is Gaunt's better judgment going to do?' said Markham. 'It's always alarming to hear of a man's better judgment. What is it all about?'

Lady Markham looked up in her son's face with great seriousness and meaning. 'Captain Gaunt,' she said, 'is talking of leaving London, which—if he finds his stay unprofitable and of little advantage to him—though I should regret it very much, I should think him wise to do.'

'Gaunt leaving London? Oh no! He is taking you in. A man who is a ladies' man likes to say that to ladies in order to be coaxed to stay. That is at the bottom of it, I'll be bound. And where was our hero going, if he had his way.'

Frances thought that there were signs in Gaunt of failing temper, so she hastened to explain. 'He was going to Switzerland, Markham, to a place Mrs. Gaunt knows of, where she is to be.'

'To Switzerland!' Markham cried—'the dullest place on the face of the earth. What would you do there, my gallant Captain? Climb?—or listen all day long to those who recount their climbings, or those who plan them—all full of insane self-complacency, as if there was the highest morality in climbing mountains. Were you going in for the mountains, Fan?'

'Frances was pleading for London—a very unusual fancy for her,' said Lady Markham. 'The very young are not afraid of responsibility; but I am, at my age. I could not venture to recommend Captain Gaunt to stay.'

'I only meant—I only thought——' Frances stammered and hung her head a little. Had she been indiscreet? Her abashed look caught young Gaunt's eye. Why should she be abashed?—and on his account? It made his heart stir a little, that heart which had been so crushed and broken, and, he thought, pitched away into a corner; but at that moment he found it again stirring quite warm and vigorous in his breast.

'I always said she was full of sense,' said Markham. 'A little sister is an admirable institution; and her wisdom is all the more delightful that she doesn't know what sense it is.' He patted Frances on the shoulder as he spoke. 'It wouldn't do, would it, Fan, to have him run away?'

'If there was any question of that,' Gaunt said, with something of a defiant air.

'And to Switzerland,' said Markham, with a chuckle. 'Shall I tell you my experiences, Gaunt? I was there for my sins once, with the mother here. Among all her admirable qualities, my mamma has that of demanding few sacrifices in this way—so that a man is bound in honour to make one now and then.'

'Markham, when you are going to say what you know I will disapprove, you always put in a little flattery—which silences me.'

He kissed his hand to her with a short laugh. 'The place,' he said, 'was in possession of an athletic band, in roaring spirits and tremendous training, men and women all the same. You could scarcely tell the creatures one from another—all burned red in the faces of them, worn out of all shape and colour in the clothes of them. They clamped along the passages in their big boots from two o'clock till five every morning. They came back, perspiring, in the afternoon—a procession of old clothes, all complacent, as if they had done the finest action in the world. And the rest of us surrounded them with a circle of worshippers, till they clamped up-stairs again; fortunately very early, to bed. Then a faint sort of life began for *nous autres.* We came out and admired the stars and drank our coffee in peace—short-lived peace, for, as everybody had been up at two in the morning, the poor beggars naturally wanted to get to bed. You are an athletic chap, so you might like it, and perhaps attain canonisation by going up Mont Blanc.'

'My mother—is not in one of those mountain centres,' said Gaunt, with a faint smile.

'Worse and worse,' said Markham. 'We went through that experience too. In the non-climbing places the old ladies have it all their own way. You will dine at two, my poor martyr; you will have tea at six, with cold meat. The table-cloths and napkins will last a week. There will be honey with flies in it on every table. All about the neighbourhood, mild constitutionals will meet you at every hour in the day. There will be gentle raptures over a new view. "Have you seen it, Captain Gaunt? Do come with us to-morrow and let us show it you; *quite* the finest view"—of Pilatus, or Monte Rosa, or the Jungfrau, or whatever it may happen to be. And meanwhile we shall all be playing our little game comfortably at home. We will give you a thought now and then. Frances will run to the window and say, "I thought that was Captain Gaunt's step;" and the mother will explain to Sir Thomas, "Such a pity our poor young friend found that London did not suit him."'

'Well, Markham,' said his mother, with firmness, 'if Captain Gaunt found that London did not suit him, I should think all the more highly of him that he withdrew in time.'

Perhaps the note was too forcibly struck. Gaunt drew himself slightly up. 'There is nothing so very serious in the matter, after all. London may not suit me; but still I do not suppose it will do me any harm.'

Frances looked on at this triangular duel with eyes that acquired gradually consciousness and knowledge. She saw ere long that there was much more in it than met the eye. At first, her appeal to young Gaunt to remain had been made on the impulse of the moment, and without thought. Now she remained silent, only with a faint gesture of protest when Markham brought in her name.

'Let us go to luncheon,' said her mother. 'I am glad to hear you are not really in earnest, Captain Gaunt; for of course we should all be very sorry if you went away. London is a siren to whose wiles we all give in. I am as bad myself as any one can be. I never make any secret of my affection for town; but there are some with whose constitutions it never agrees, who either take it too seriously or with too much passion. We old stagers get very moderate and methodical in our dissipations, and make a little go a long way.'

But there was a chill at table; and Lady Markham was 'not in her usual force.' Sir Thomas, who came in as usual as they were going down-stairs, said, 'Anything the matter? Oh, Captain Gaunt going away. Dear me, so soon! I am surprised. It takes a great deal of self-control to make a young fellow leave town at this time of the year.'

'It was only a project,' said poor young Gaunt. He was pleased to be persuaded that it was more than could be expected of him. Lady Markham gave Sir Thomas a look which made that devoted friend uncomfortable; but he did not know what he had done to deserve it. And so Captain Gaunt made up his mind to stay.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

"YES, I wish you had not said anything, Frances: not that it matters very much. I don't suppose he was in earnest, or, at all events, he would have changed his mind before evening. But, my dear, this poor young fellow is not able to follow the same course as Markham's friends do. They are at it all the year round, now in town, now somewhere else. They bet and play, and throw their money about, and at the end of the year they are not very much the worse—or at least that is what he always tells me. One time they lose, but another time they gain. And then they are men who have time, and money more or less. But when a young man with a little money comes among them, he may ruin himself before he knows.'

'I am very sorry,' said Frances. 'It is difficult to believe that Markham could hurt any one.'

Her mother gave her a grateful look. 'Dear Markham!' she said. 'To think that he should be so good—and yet —— It gives me great pleasure, Frances, that you should appreciate your brother. Your father never did so—and all of them, all the Warings—— But it is understood between us, is it not, that we are not to touch upon that subject?'

'Perhaps it would be painful, mamma. But how am I to understand unless I am told?'

'You have never been told, then—your father——? But I might have known he would say very little; he always hated explanations. My dear,' said Lady Markham, with evident agitation, 'if I were to enter into that story, it would inevitably take the character of a self-defence, and I can't do that to my own child. It is the worst of such unfortunate circumstances as ours that you must judge your parents, and find one or other in the wrong. Oh yes; I do not deceive myself on that subject. And you are a partisan in your nature. Con was more or less of a cynic, as people become who are bred up in Society, as she was. She could believe we were both wrong, calmly, without any particular feeling. But you,—of your nature, Frances, you would be a partisan.'

'I hope not, mamma. I should be the partisan of both sides,' said Frances, almost under her breath.

Lady Markham rose and gave her a kiss. 'Remain so,' she said, 'my dear child. I will say no harm of him to you, as I am sure he has said no harm of me. Now let us think no more of Markham's faults, nor of poor young Gaunt's danger, nor of——'

'Danger?' said Frances, with an anxious look.

'If it were less than danger, would I have said so much, do you think?'

'But, mamma, pardon me,—if it is real danger, ought you not to say more?'

'What! for the sake of another woman's son, betray and forsake my own? How can I say to him in so many words, "Take care of Markham; avoid Markham and his friends." I have said it in hints as much as I dare. Yes, Frances, I would do a great deal for another woman's son. It would be the strongest plea. But in this case how can I do more? Never mind; fate will work itself out quite independent of you and me. And here are people coming—Claude, probably, to see if you have changed your mind about him, or whether I have heard from Constance. Poor boy! he must have one of you two.'

'I hope not,' said Frances, seriously.

'But I am sure of it,' cried her mother, with a smile. 'We shall see which of us is the better prophet. But this is not Claude. I hear the sweep of a woman's train. Hush!' she said, holding up a finger. She rose as the door opened, and then hastened forward with an astonished exclamation, 'Nelly!' and held out both her hands.

'You did not look for me?' said Mrs. Winterbourn, with a defiant air.

'No, indeed; I did not look for you. And so fine, and looking so well. He must have taken an unexpected turn for the better, and you have come to tell me.'

'Yes, am I not smart?' said Nelly, looking down upon her beautiful dress with a curious air, half pleasure, half scorn. 'It is almost new; I have never worn it before.'

'Sit down here beside me, my dear, and tell me all about it. When did this happy change occur?'

'Happy? For whom?' she asked, with a harsh little laugh. 'No, Lady Markham, there is no change for the better: the other way—they say there is no hope. It will not be very long, they say, before——'

'And Nelly, Nelly! you here, in your fine new dress.'

'Yes; it seems ridiculous, does it not?' she said, laughing again. 'I away—going out to pay visits in my best gown, and my husband—dying. Well! I know that if I had stayed any longer in that dreary house without any air, and with Sarah Winterbourn, I should have died. Oh, you don't know what it is. To be shut up there, and never hear a step except the doctor's, or Robert's carrying up the beef-tea. So I burst out of prison, to save my life. You may blame me if you like, but it was to save my life, neither less nor more.'

'Nelly, my dear,' said Lady Markham, taking her hand, 'there is nothing wonderful in your coming to see so old a friend as I am. It is quite natural. To whom should you go in your trouble, if not to your old friends?'

Upon which Nelly laughed again in an excited hysterical way. 'I have been on quite a round,' she said. 'You always did scold me, Lady Markham; and I know you will do so again. I was determined to show myself once more before—the waters went over my head. I can come out now in my pretty gown. But *afterwards*, if I did such a thing everybody would think me mad. Now you know why I have come, and you can scold me as much as you please. But I have done it, and it can't be undone. It is a kind of farewell visit, you know,' she added, in her excited tone. 'After this I shall disappear into—crape and affliction. A widow! What a horrible word. Think of me, Nelly St. John; me, a widow! Isn't it horrible, horrible? That is what they will call me, Markham and the other men—the widow. I know how they will speak, as well as if I heard them. Lady Markham, they will call me *that*, and you know what they will mean.'

'Nelly, Nelly, my poor child!' Lady Markham held her hand and patted it softly with her own. 'Oh Nelly, you are very imprudent, very silly. You will shock everybody, and make them talk. You ought not to have come out now. If you had sent for me, I would have gone to you in a moment.'

'It was not *that* I wanted. I wanted just to be like others for once—before—— I don't seem to care what will happen to me—afterwards. What do they do to a woman, Lady Markham, when her husband dies? They would not let her bury herself with him, or burn herself, or any of those sensible things. What do they do, Lady Markham? Brand her somewhere in her flesh with a red-hot iron—with "Widow" written upon her flesh?'

'My dear, you must care for poor Mr. Winterbourn a great deal more than you were aware, or you would not feel this so bitterly. Nelly——'

'Hush!' she said, with a sort of solemnity. 'Don't say that, Lady Markham. Don't talk about what I feel. It is all so miserable, I don't know what I am doing. To think that he should be my husband, and I just boiling with life, and longing to get free, to get free: I that was born to be a good woman, if I could, if you would all have let me, if I had not been made to—— Look here! I am going to speak to that little girl. You can say the other thing afterwards. I know you will. You can make it look so right—so right. Frances, if you are persuaded to marry Claude Ramsay, or any other man that you don't care for, remember you'll just be like me. Look at me, dressed out, paying visits, and my husband dying. Perhaps he may be dead when I get home.' She paused a moment with a nervous shivering, and drew her summer cloak closely around her. 'He is going to die, and I am running about the streets. It is horrible, isn't it? He doesn't want me, and I don't want him; and next week I shall be all in crape, and branded on my shoulder or somewhere—where, Lady Markham?—all for a man who—all for a man that——'

'Nelly, Nelly! for heaven's sake, at least respect the child.'

'It is because I respect her that I say anything. Oh, it is all horrible! And already the men and everybody are discussing, What will Nelly do? The widow, what will she do?'

Then the excited creature suddenly, without warning, broke out into sobbing and tears. 'Oh, don't think it is for grief,' she said, as Frances instinctively came towards her; 'it's only the excitement, the horror of it, the feeling that it is coming so near. I never was in the house with Death, never, that I can remember. And I shall be the chief mourner, don't you know? They will want me to do all sorts of things. What do you do when you are a widow, Lady Markham? Have you to give orders for the funeral, and say what sort of a—coffin there is to be, and—all that?'

'Nelly, Nelly! Oh, for God's sake, don't say those dreadful things. You know you will not be troubled about anything, least of all—— And, my dear, my dear, recollect your husband is still alive. It is dreadful to talk of details such as those for a living man.'

'Most likely,' she said, looking up with a shiver, 'he will be dead when I get home. Oh, I wish it might all be over, everything, before I go home. Couldn't you hide me somewhere, Lady Markham? Save me from seeing him and all those—details, as you call them. I cannot bear it; and I have no mother nor any one to come to me—nobody, nobody but Sarah Winterbourn.'

'I will go home with you, Nelly; I will take you back, my dear. Frances, take care of her till I get my bonnet. My poor child, compose yourself. Try and be calm. You must be calm, and bear it,' Lady Markham said.

Frances, with alarm, found herself left alone with this strange being—not much older than herself, and yet thrown amid such tragic elements. She stood by her, not knowing how to approach the subject of her thoughts, or indeed any subject—for to talk to her of common things was impossible. Mrs. Winterbourn, however, did not turn towards Frances. Her sobbing ended suddenly, as it had begun. She sat with her head upon her hands, gazing at the light. After a while she said, though without looking round, 'You once offered to sit up with me, thinking, or pretending, I don't know which, that I was sitting up with him all night: would you have done so if you had been in my place?'

'I think—I don't know,' said Frances, checking herself.

'You would—you are not straightforward enough to say it—I know you would; and in your heart you think I am a bad creature, a woman without a heart.'

'I don't think so,' said Frances. 'You must have a heart, or you would not be so unhappy.'

'Do you know what I am unhappy about? About myself. I am not thinking of him; he married me to please himself, not me,—and I am thinking of myself, not him. It is all fair. You would do the same if you married like me.'

Frances made no reply. She looked with awe and pity at this miserable excitement and wretchedness, which was so unlike anything her innocent soul knew.

'You don't answer,' said Nelly. 'You think you never would have married like me. But how can you tell? If you had an offer as good as Mr. Winterbourn, your mother would make you marry him. I made a great match, don't you know?

And if you ever have that in your power, Lady Markham will make short work of your objections. You will just do as other people have done. Claude Ramsay is not so rich as Mr. Winterbourn; but I suppose he will be your fate, unless Con comes back and takes him, which, very likely, is what she will do. Oh, are you ready, Lady Markham? It is a pity you should give yourself so much trouble; for, you see, I am quite composed now, and ready to go home.'

'Come, then, my dear Nelly. It is better you should lose no time.' Lady Markham paused to say, 'I shall probably be back quite soon; but if I don't come, don't be alarmed,' in Frances' ear.

The girl went to the window and watched Nelly sweep out to her carriage as if nothing could ever happen to her. The sight of the servants and of the few passers-by had restored her in a moment to herself. Frances stood and pondered for some time at the window. Nelly's was an agitating figure to burst into her quiet life. She did not need the lesson it taught; but yet it filled her with trouble and awe. This brilliant surface of Society, what tragedies lay underneath! She scarcely dared to follow the young wife in imagination to her home; but she felt with her the horror of the approaching death, the dread interval when the event was coming, the still more dread moment after, when, all shrinking and trembling in her youth and loneliness, she would have to live side by side with the dead, whom she had never loved, to whom no faithful bond had united her—— It was not till another carriage drew up and some one got out of it that Frances retreated, with a very different sort of alarm, from the window. It was some one coming to call, she did not see whom, one of those wonderful people who came to talk over with her mother other people whom Frances did not know. How was she to find any subject on which to talk to them? Her anxiety was partially relieved by seeing that it was Claude who came in. He explained that Lady Someone had dropped him at the door, having picked him up at some other place where they had both been calling. 'There is a little east in the wind,' he said, pulling up the collar of his coat:

'Was that Nelly Winterbourn I saw driving away from the door? I thought it was Nelly. And when he is dying, with not many hours to live——!'

'And why should not she come to mamma?' said Frances. 'She has no mother of her own.'

'Ah,' said Ramsay, looking at her keenly, 'I see what you mean. She has no mother of her own; and therefore she comes to Markham's, which is next best.'

'I said, to my mother,' said Frances, indignantly. 'I don't see what Markham has to do with it.'

'All the same, I shouldn't like my wife to be about the streets, going to—any one's mother, when I was dying.'

'It would be right enough,' cried Frances, hot and indignant, 'if you had married a woman who did not care for you.' She forgot, in the heat of her partisanship, that she was admitting too much. But Claude did not remember, any more than she.

'Oh, come,' he said, 'Miss Waring, Frances. (May I call you Frances? It seems unnatural to call you Miss Waring, for, though I only saw you for the first time a little while ago, I have known you all your life.) Do you think its quite fair to compare me to Winterbourn? He was fifty when he married Nelly, a fellow quite used up. At all events, I am young, and never was fast; and I don't see,' he added pathetically, 'why a woman shouldn't be able to care for me.'

'Oh, I did not mean that,' cried Frances, with penitence; 'I only meant——'

'And you shouldn't,' said Claude, shaking his head, 'pay so much attention to what Nelly says. She makes herself out a martyr now; but she was quite willing to marry Winterbourn. She was quite pleased. It was a great match; and now she is going to get the good of it.'

'If being very unhappy is getting the good of it——!'

'Oh, unhappy!' said Claude. It was evident he held Mrs. Winterbourn's unhappiness lightly enough. 'I'll tell you what,' he said, 'talking of unhappiness, I saw another friend of yours the other day who was unhappy, if you like—that young soldier-fellow, the Indian man. What do you call him?—Grant? No; that's a Nile man. Gaunt. Now if Lady Markham had taken him in hand——'

'Captain Gaunt!' said Frances, in alarm; 'what has happened to him, Mr. Ramsay? Is he ill? Is he——' Her face flushed with anxiety, and then grew pale.

'I can't say exactly,' said Claude, 'for I am not in his confidence; but I should say he had lost his money, or something of that sort. I don't frequent those sort of places in a general way; but sometimes, if I've been out in the evening, if there's no east in the wind, and no rain or fog, I just look in for a moment. I rather think some of those fellows had been punishing that poor innocent Indian man. When a stranger comes among them, that's a way they have. One feels dreadfully sorry for the man; but what can you do?'

'What can you do? Oh, anything, rather than stand by,' cried Frances, excited by sudden fears, 'and see—and see —— I don't know what you mean, Mr. Ramsay! Is it *gambling?* Is that what you mean?'

'You should speak to Markham,' he replied. 'Markham's deep in all that sort of thing. If anybody could interfere, it would be Markham. But I don't see how even he could interfere. He is not the fellow's keeper; and what could he say? The other fellows are gentlemen; they don't cheat, or that sort of thing. Only, when a man has not much money, or has not the heart to lose it like a man——'

'Mr. Ramsay, you don't know anything about Captain Gaunt,' cried Frances, with hot indignation and excitement. 'I don't understand what you mean. He has the heart for—whatever he may have to do. He is not like you people, who talk about everybody, who know everybody. But he has been in action; he has distinguished himself; he is not a nobody like——'

'You mean me,' said Claude. 'So far as being in action goes, I am a nobody of course. But I hope, if I went in for play and that sort of thing, I would bear my losses without looking as ghastly as a skeleton. That is where a man of the world, however little you may think of us, has the better of people out of Society. But I have nothing to do with his losses. I only tell you, so that, if you can do anything to get hold of him, to keep him from going to the bad——'

'To the—bad!' she cried. Her face grew pale; and something appalling, an indistinct vision of horrors, dimly appeared before Frances' eyes. She seemed to see not only George Gaunt, but his mother weeping, his father looking on with a startled miserable face. 'Oh,' she cried, trying to throw off the impression, 'you don't know what you are saying. George Gaunt would never do anything that is bad. You are making some dreadful mistake, or—— Oh, Mr. Ramsay, couldn't you tell him, if you know it is so bad, before——?'

'What!' cried Claude, horror-struck. 'I tell—a fellow I scarcely know! He would have a right to—kick me, or something—or at least to tell me to mind my own business. No; but you might speak to Markham. Markham is the only man who perhaps might interfere.'

'Oh, Markham! always Markham! Oh, I wish any one would tell me what Markham has to do with it,' cried Frances, with a moan.

'That's just one of his occupations,' said Ramsay, calmly. 'They say it doesn't tell much on him one way or other, but Markham can't live without play. Don't you think, as Lady Markham does not come in, that you might give me a cup of tea?'

## CHAPTER XXXVII

Constance Waring had not been enjoying herself in Bordighera. Her amusement indeed came to an end with the highly exciting yet disagreeable scene which took place between herself and young Gaunt the day before he went away. It is late to recur to this, so much having passed in the meantime; but it really was the only thing of note that happened to her. The blank negative with which she had met his suit, the air of surprise, almost indignation, with which his impassioned appeal was received, confounded poor young Gaunt. He asked her, with a simplicity that sprang out of despair, 'Did you not know then? Were you not aware? Is it possible that you were not—prepared?'

'For what, Captain Gaunt?' Constance asked, fixing him with a haughty look.

He returned that look with one that would have cowed a weaker woman. 'Did you not know that I—loved you?' he said.

Even she quailed a little. 'Oh, as for that, Captain Gaunt!—a man must be responsible for his own follies of that kind. I did not ask you to—care for me, as you say. I thought, indeed, that you would have the discretion to see that anything of the kind between us was out of the question.'

'Why?' he asked, almost sternly; and Constance hesitated a little, finding it perhaps not so easy to reply.

'Because,' she said after a pause, with a faint flush, which showed that the effort cost her something—'because—we belong to two different worlds—because all our habits and modes of living are different.' By this time she began to grow a little indignant that he should give her so much trouble. 'Because you are Captain Gaunt, of the Indian service, and I am Constance Waring,' she said, with angry levity.

He grew deadly red with fierce pride and shame.

'Because you are of the higher class, and I of the lower,' he said. 'Is that what you mean? Yet I am a gentleman, and one cannot well be more.'

To this she made no reply, but moved away from where she had been standing to listen to him, and returned to her chair. They were on the loggia, and this sudden movement left him at one end, while she returned to the other. He stood for a time following her with his eyes; then, having watched the angry *abandon* with which she threw herself into her seat, turning her head away, he came a little closer with a certain sternness in his aspect.

'Miss Waring,' he said, 'notwithstanding the distance between us, you have allowed me to be your—companion for some time past.'

'Yes,' she said. 'What then? There was no one else, either for me or for you.'

'That, then, was the sole reason?'

'Captain Gaunt,' she cried, 'what is the use of all this? We were thrown in each other's way. I meant nothing more; if you did, it was your own fault. You could not surely expect that I should marry you and go to India with you? It is absurd—it is ridiculous,' she cried, with a hot blush, throwing back her head. He saw with suddenly quickened perceptions that the suggestion filled her with contempt and shame. And the young man's veins tingled as if fire was in them; the rage of love despised shook his very soul.

'And why?' he cried—'and why?' his voice tremulous with passion. 'What is ridiculous in that? It may be ridiculous that I should have believed in a girl like you. I may have been a vain weak fool to do it, not to know that I was only a plaything for your amusement; but it never could be ridiculous to think that a woman might love and marry an honourable man.'

He paused several times to command his voice, and she listened impatient, not looking at him, clasping and unclasping her hands.

'It would be ridiculous in me,' she cried. 'You don't know me, or you never would have dreamt—— Captain Gaunt, this had better end. It is of no use lashing yourself to fury, or me either. Think the worst of me you can; it will be all the better for you—it will make you hate me. Yes, I have been amusing myself; and so, I supposed, were you too.'

'No,' he said, 'you could not think that.'

She turned round and gave him one look, then averted her eyes again, and said no more.

'You did not think that,' he cried, vehemently. 'You knew it was death to me, and you did not mind. You listened and smiled, and led me on. You never checked me by a word, or gave me to understand—— Oh,' he cried, with a sudden change of tone, 'Constance, if it is India, if it is only India, you have but to hold up a finger, and I will give up India without a word.'

He had suddenly come close to her again. A wild hope had blazed up in him. He made as though he would throw himself at her feet. She lifted her hand hurriedly to forbid this action.

'Don't!' she cried, sharply. 'Men are not theatrical nowadays. It is nothing to me whether you go to India or stay at home. I have told you already I never thought of anything beyond friendship. Why should not we have amused each other, and no harm? If I have done you any harm, I am sorry; but it will only be for a very short time.'

He had turned away, stung once more into bitterness, and had tried to say something in reply; but his strength had not been equal to his intention, and in the strong revulsion of feeling, the young man leant against the wall of the loggia, hiding his face in his hands.

There was a little pause. Then Constance turned round half stealthily to see why there was no reply. Her heart perhaps smote her a little when she saw that attitude of despair. She rose, and, after a moment's hesitation, laid her hand lightly on his shoulder. 'Captain Gaunt, don't vex yourself like that. I am not worth it. I never thought that any one could be so much in earnest about me.'

'Constance,' he cried, turning round quickly upon her, 'I am all in earnest. I care for nothing in the world but you. Oh, say that you were hasty—say that you will give me a little hope!'

She shook her head. 'I think,' she said, 'that all the time you must have mistaken me for Frances. If I had not come, you would have fallen in love with her, and she with you.'

'Don't insult me, at least!' he cried.

'Insult you—by saying that *my* sister——! You forget yourself, Captain Gaunt. If my sister is not good enough for you, I wonder who you think good enough. She is better than I am; far better—in that way.'

'There is only one woman in the world for me; I don't care if there was no other,' he said.

'That is benevolent towards the rest of the world,' said Constance, recovering her composure. 'Do you know,' she said, gravely, 'I think it will be much better for you to go away. I hope we may eventually be good friends; but not just at present. Please go. I should like to part friends; and I should like you to take a parcel for Frances, as you are going to London; and to see my mother. But, for heaven's sake, go away now. A walk will do you good, and the fresh air. You will see things in their proper aspect. Don't look at me as if you could kill me. What I am saying is quite true.'

'A walk,' he repeated with unutterable scorn, 'will do me good!'

'Yes,' she said, calmly. 'It will do you a great deal of good. And change of air and scene will soon set you all right. Oh, I know very well what I am saying. But pray, go now. Papa will make his appearance in about ten minutes; and you don't want to make a confidant of papa.'

'It matters nothing to me who knows,' he said; but all the same he gathered himself up and made an effort to recover his calm.

'It does to me, then,' said Constance. 'I am not at all inclined for papa's remarks. Captain Gaunt, good-bye. I wish you a pleasant journey; and I hope that some time or other we may meet again, and be very good friends.'

She had the audacity to hold out her hand to him calmly, looking into his eyes as she spoke. But this was more than young Gaunt could bear. He gave her a fierce look of passion and despair, waved his hand without touching hers, and hurried headlong away.

Constance stood listening till she heard the door close behind him; and then she seated herself tranquilly again in her chair. It was evening, and she was waiting for her father for dinner. She had taken her last ramble with the Gaunts that afternoon; and it was after their return from this walk that the young soldier had rushed back to inform her of the letters which called him at once to London, and had burst forth into the love-tale which had been trembling on his lips for days past. She had known very well that she could not escape —that the reckoning for these innocent pleasures would have to come. But she had not expected it at that moment, and had been temporarily taken by surprise. She seated herself now with a sigh of relief, yet regret. 'Thank goodness, that's over,' she said to herself; but she was not quite comfortable on the subject. In the first place, it *was* over, and there was an end of all her simple fun. No more walks, no more talks skirting the edge of the sentimental and dangerous, no more diplomatic exertions to keep the victim within due limits—fine exercises of power, such as always carry with them a real pleasure. And then, being no more than human, she had a little compunction as to the sufferer. 'He will get over it,' she said to herself; change of air and scene would no doubt do everything for him. Men have died, and worms have eaten them, etc. Still, she could not but be sorry. He had looked very wretched, poor fellow, which was complimentary; but she had felt something of the self-contempt of a man who has got a cheap victory over an antagonist much less powerful than himself. A practised swordsman (or woman) of Society should not measure arms with a merely natural person, knowing nothing of the noble art of self-defence. It was perhaps a little—mean, she said to herself. Had it been one of her own species, the duel would have been as amusing throughout, and no harm done. This vexed her a little, and made her uneasy. She remembered, though she did not in general care much about books, or the opinion of the class of nobodies who write them, of some very sharp things that had been said upon this subject. Lady Clara Vere de Vere had not escaped handling; and she thought that after it Lady Clara must have felt small, as Constance Waring did now.

But then, on the other hand, what could be more absurd than for a man to suppose, because a girl was glad enough to amuse herself with him for a week or two, in absolute default of all other society, that she was ready to marry him, and go to India with him! To India! What an idea! And it had been quite as much for his amusement as for hers. Neither of them had any one else: it was in self-defence—it was the only resource against absolute dulness. It had made the time pass for him as well as for her. He ought to have known all along that she meant nothing more. Indeed Constance wondered how he could be so silly as to want to have a wife and double his expenses, and bind himself for life. A man, she reflected, must be so much better off when he has only himself to think of. Fancy him taking *her* bills on his shoulders as well as his own! She wondered, with a contemptuous laugh, how he would like that, or if he had the least idea what these bills would be. On the whole, it was evident, in every point of view, that he was much better out of it. Perhaps even by this time he would have been tearing his hair, had she taken him at his word. But no. Constance could not persuade herself that this was likely. Yet he would have torn his hair, she was certain, before the end of the first year. Thus she worked herself round to something like self-forgiveness; but all the same there rankled at her heart a sense of meanness, the consciousness of having gone out in battle-array and vanquished with beat of drum and sound of trumpet an unprepared and undefended adversary, an antagonist with whom the struggle was not fair. Her sense of honour was touched, and all her arguments could not content her with herself.

'I suppose you have been out with the Gaunts again?' Waring said, as they sat at table, in a dissatisfied tone.

'Yes; but you need never put the question to me again in that uncomfortable way, for George Gaunt is going off to-morrow, papa.'

'Oh, he is going off to-morrow? Then I suppose you have been honest, and given him his *congé* at last?'

'I honest? I did not know I had ever been accused of picking and stealing. If he had asked me for his *congé*, he should have had it long ago. He has been sent for, it seems.'

'Then has the *congé* not yet been asked for? In that case we shall have him back again, I suppose?' said her father, in a tone of resignation, and with a shrug of his shoulders.

'No; for his people will be away. They are going to Switzerland, and the Durants are going to Homburg. Where do you mean to go, when it is too hot to stay here?'

He looked at her half angrily for a moment. 'It is never too hot to stay here,' he said; then, after a pause, 'We can move higher up among the hills.'

'Where one will never see a soul—worse even than here!'

'Oh, you will see plenty of country-folk,' he said—'a fine race of people, mountaineers, yet husbandmen, which is a rare combination.'

Constance looked up at him with a little *moue* of mingled despair and disdain.

'With perhaps some romantic young Italian count for you to practise upon,' he said.

Though the humour on his part was grim and derisive rather than sympathetic, her countenance cleared a little. 'You know, papa,' she said, with a faintly complaining note, 'that my Italian is very limited, and your counts and countesses speak no language but their own.'

'Oh, who can tell? There may be some poor soldier on furlough who has French enough to—— By the way,' he added, sharply, 'you must remember that they don't understand flirtation with girls. If you were a married woman, or a young widow——'

'You might pass me off as a young widow, papa. It would be amusing—or at least it *might* be amusing. That is not a quality of the life here in general. What an odd thing it is that in England we always believe life to be so much more amusing abroad than at home.'

'It is amusing—at Monte Carlo, perhaps.'

Constance made another *moue* at the name of Monte Carlo, from the sight of which she had not derived much pleasure. 'I suppose,' she said, impartially, 'what really amuses one is the kind of diversion one has been accustomed to, and to know everybody: chiefly to know everybody,' she added, after a pause.

'With these views, to know nobody must be bad luck indeed!'

'It is,' she said, with great candour; 'that is why I have been so much with the Gaunts. One can't live absolutely alone, you know, papa.'

'I can—with considerable success,' he replied.

'Ah, you! There are various things to account for it with you,' she said.

He waited for a moment, as if to know what these various things were; then smiled to himself a little angrily at his daughter's calm way of taking his disabilities for granted. It was not till some time after, when the dinner had advanced a stage, that he spoke again. Then he said, without any introduction, 'I often wonder, Constance, when you find this life so dull as you do——'

'Yes, very dull,' she said frankly,—'especially now, when all the people are going away.'

'I wonder often,' he repeated, 'my dear, why you stay; for there is nothing to recompense you for such a sacrifice. If it is for my sake, it is a pity, for I could really get on very well alone. We don't see very much of each other; and till now, if you will pardon me for saying so, your mind has been taken up with a pursuit which—you could have carried on much better at home.'

'You mean what you are pleased to call flirtation, papa? No, I could not have carried on that sort of thing at home. The conditions are altogether different. It *is* difficult to account for my staying, when, clearly, you don't consider me of any use, and don't want me.'

'I have never said that. Of course I am very glad to have you. It is in the bond, and therefore my right. I was regarding the question solely from your point of view.'

Constance did not answer immediately. She paused to think. When she had turned the subject over in her mind, she replied, 'I need not tell you how complicated one's motives get. It takes a long time to make sure which is really the fundamental one, and how it works.'

'You are a philosopher, my dear.'

'Not more than one must be with Society pressing upon one as it does, papa. Nothing is straightforward nowadays. You have to dig quite deep down before you come at the real meaning of anything you do; and very often, when you get hold of it, you don't quite like to acknowledge it, even to yourself.'

'That is rather an alarming preface, but very just too. If you don't like to acknowledge it to yourself, you will like still less to acknowledge it to me?'

'I don't quite see that: perhaps I am harder upon myself than you would be. No; but I prefer to think of it a little more before I tell you. I have a kind of feeling now that it is because—but you will think that a shabby sort of pride—it is because I am too proud to own myself beaten, which I should do if I were to go back.'

'It is a very natural sort of pride,' he said.

'But it is not all that. I must go a little deeper still. Not to-night. I have done as much thinking as I am quite able for to-night.'

And thus the question was left for another day.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

NEXT morning, Constance, seated as usual in the loggia, which was now, as the weather grew hot, veiled with an awning, heard —her ears being very quick, and on the alert for every sound —a tinkle of the bell, a sound of admittance, the step of

Domenico leading some visitor to the place in which she sat. Was it *he*, coming yet again to implore her pardon, an extension of privileges, a hope for the future? She made out instantaneously, however, that the footstep which followed Domenico was not that of young Gaunt. It was softer, less decided—an indefinite female step. She sat up in her chair and listened, letting her book fall, and next moment saw Mrs. Gaunt, old-fashioned, unassured, with a troubled look upon her face, in her shawl and big hat, come out almost timidly upon the loggia. Constance sprang to her feet—then in a moment collapsed and shank away into herself. Before the young lover she was a queen, and to her father she preserved her dignity very well; but when *his* mother appeared, the girl had no longer any power to hold up her head. Mrs. Gaunt was old, very badly dressed, not very clever or wise; but Constance felt those mild, somewhat dull eyes penetrating to the depths of her own guilty heart.

'How do you do, Miss Waring?' said Mrs. Gaunt, stiffly. (She had called her 'my dear' yesterday, and had been so anxious to please her, doing everything she could to ingratiate herself.) 'I hope I do not disturb you so early; but my son, Captain Gaunt, is going away——'

'Oh yes—I heard. I am very sorry,' the guilty Constance murmured, hanging her head.

'I do not know that there is any cause to be sorry; we were going anyhow in a few days. And in London my son will find many friends.'

'I mean,' said Constance, drawing a long breath, beginning to recover a little courage, feeling, even in her discomfiture, a faint amusement still—'I mean, for his friends here, who will miss him so much.'

Mrs. Gaunt darted a glance at her, half wrathful, half wavering; it had seemed so unnatural to her that any girl could play with or resist her son. Perhaps, after all, he had misunderstood Constance. She said, proudly, 'His friends always miss George; he is so friendly. Nobody ever asks anything from him, to take any trouble or make any sacrifice, in vain.'

'I am sure he is very good,' said Constance, tremulous, yet waking to the sense of humour underneath.

'That is why I am here to-day,' said Mrs. Gaunt. 'My son—remembers—though perhaps you will allow he has not much call to do so, Miss Waring—that you said something about a parcel for Frances. Dear Frances; he will see her—that will always be something.'

'Then he is not coming to say good-bye?' she said, opening her eyes with a semblance of innocent and regretful surprise.

'Oh, Miss Waring! oh, Constance!' cried the poor mother. 'But perhaps my boy has made a mistake. He is very wretched. I am sure he never closed his eyes all last night. If you saw him this morning, it would go to your heart. Ah, my dear, he thinks you will have nothing to say to him, and his heart is broken. If you will only let me tell him that he has made a mistake!'

'Is it about me, Mrs. Gaunt?'

'Oh, Constance! who should it be about but you? He has never looked at any one else since he saw you first. All that has been in his mind has been how to see you, how to talk to you, to make himself agreeable if he could—to try and get your favour. I will not conceal anything from you. I never was satisfied from the first. I thought you were too grand, too much used to fine people and their ways, ever to look at one of us. But then, when I saw my George, the flower of my flock, with nothing in his mind but how to please you, his eyes following you wherever you went, as if there was not another in the world——'

'There was not another in Bordighera, at least,' said Constance, under her breath.

'There was not——? What did you say—what did you say? Oh, there was nobody that he ever wasted a thought on but you. I had my doubts all the time. I used to say, "George, dear, don't go too far; don't throw everything at her feet till you know how she feels." But I might as well have talked to the sea. If he had been the king of all the world, he would have poured everything into your lap. Oh, my dear, a man's true love is a great thing; it is more than crowns or queen's jewels. You might have all the world contains, and beside that it would be as nothing—and this is what he has given you. Surely you did not understand him when he spoke, or he did not understand you. Perhaps you were taken by surprise—fluttered, as girls will be, and said the wrong words. Or you were shy. Or you did not know your own mind. Oh, Constance, say it was a mistake, and give me a word of comfort to take to my boy!'

The tears were running down the poor mother's cheeks as she pleaded thus for her son. When she had left home that morning, after surprising, divining the secret, which he had done his best to hide from her overnight, there had been a double purpose in Mrs. Gaunt's mind. She had intended to pour out such vials of wrath upon the girl who had scorned her son, such floods of righteous indignation, that never, never should she raise her head again; and she had intended to watch her opportunity, to plead on her knees, if need were, if there was any hope of getting him what he wanted. It did not disturb her that these two intentions were totally opposed to each other. And she had easily been beguiled into thinking that there was good hope still.

While she spoke, Constance on her side had been going through a series of observations, running comments upon this address, which did not move her very much. 'If he had been king of all the world—ah, that would have made a difference,' she said to herself; and it was all she could do to refrain from bursting forth in derisive laughter at the suggestion that she herself had perhaps been shy, or had not known her own mind. To think that any woman could be such a simpleton, so easily deceived! The question was, whether to be gentle with the delusion, and spare Mrs. Gaunt's feelings; or whether to strike her down at once with indignation and sharp scorn. There passed through the mind of Constance a rapid calculation that in so small a community it was better not to make an enemy, and also perhaps some softening reflections from the remorse which really had touched her last night. So that when Mrs. Gaunt ended by that fervent prayer, her knees trembling with the half intention of falling upon them, her voice faltering, her tears flowing, Constance allowed herself to be touched with responsive emotion. She put out both her hands and cried, 'Oh, don't speak like that to me; oh, don't look at me so! Dear, dear Mrs. Gaunt, teach me what to do to make up for it! for I never thought it would come to this. I never imagined that he, who deserves so much better, would trouble himself about me. Oh, what a wretched creature I am to bring trouble everywhere! for I am not free. Don't you know I am—engaged to some one else? Oh, I thought everybody knew of it! I am not free.'

'Not free!' said Mrs. Gaunt, with a cry of dismay.

'Oh, didn't you know of it?' said Constance. 'I thought everybody knew. It has been settled for a long time—since I was quite a child.'

'My dear,' said Mrs. Gaunt, solemnly, 'if your heart is not in it, you ought not to go on with it. I did hear something of—a gentleman, whom your mamma wished you to marry; who was very rich, and all that.'

Constance nodded her head slowly, in a somewhat melancholy assent.

'But I was told that you did not wish it yourself—that you had broken it off—that you had come here to avoid——' Oh, my dear girl, don't take up a false sense of duty, or—or honour—or self-sacrifice! Constance, you may have a right to sacrifice yourself, but not another—not another, dear. And all his happiness is wrapped up in you. And if it is a thing your heart does not go with!' cried the poor lady, losing herself in the complication of phrases. Constance only shook her head.

'Dear Mrs. Gaunt! I *must* think of honour and duty. What would become of us all if we put an engagement aside, because—because——? And it would be cruel to the other; he is not strong. I could not, oh, I could not break off—oh no, not for worlds—it would kill him. But will you try and persuade Captain Gaunt not to think hardly of me? I thought I might enjoy his friendship without any harm. If I have done wrong, oh forgive me!' Constance cried.

Mrs. Gaunt dried her eyes. She was a simple-minded woman who knew what she wanted, and whose instinct taught her to refuse a stone when it was offered to her instead of bread. She said, 'He will forgive you, Miss Waring; he will not think hardly of you, you may be sure. They are too infatuated to do that, when a girl like you takes the trouble to—— But I think you might have thought twice before you did it, knowing what you tell me now. A young man fresh from India, where he has been working hard for years—coming home to get up his strength, to enjoy himself a little, to make up for all his long time away—— And because you are a little lonely, and want to enjoy his—friendship, as you say, you go and spoil his holiday for him, make it all wretched, and make even his poor mother wish that he had never come home at all. And you think it will all be made up if you say you are sorry at the end! To him, perhaps, poor foolish boy; but oh, not to me.'

Constance made no reply to this. She had done her best, and for a moment she thought she had succeeded; but she had always been aware, by instinct, that the mother was less easy to beguile than the son; and she was silent, attempting no further self-defence.

'Young men are a mystery to me,' said Mrs. Gaunt, standing with agitated firmness in the middle of the loggia, taking no notice of the chair which had been offered her. She did not even look at Constance, but directed her remarks to the swaying palms in the foreground and the hills behind—'they are a mystery! There may be one under their very eyes that is as good as gold and as true as steel, and they will never so much as look at her. And there will be another that thinks of nothing but amusing herself, and that is the one they will adore. Oh, it is not for the first time now that I have found it out! I had my misgivings from the very first; but he was like all the rest—he would not hear a word from his mother; and now I am sure I wish his furlough was at an end; I wish he had never come home. His father and I would rather have waited on and pined for him, or even made up our minds to die without seeing him, rather than he should have come here to break his heart.'

She paused a moment and then resumed again, turning from the palms and distant peaks to concentrate a look of fire upon Constance, who sat sunk in her wicker chair, turning her head away.

'And if a man were to go astray after being used like that, whose fault would it be? If he were to go wrong—if he were to lose heart, to say What's the good? whose fault would it be? Oh, don't tell me that you didn't know what you were doing—that you didn't mean to break his heart! Did you think he had no heart at all? But then, why should you have taken the trouble? It wouldn't have amused you, it would have been no fun, had he had no heart.'

'You seem,' said Constance, without turning her head, launching a stray arrow in self-defence, 'to know all about it, Mrs. Gaunt.'

'Perhaps I do know all about it,—I am a woman myself. I wasn't always old and faded. I know there are some things a girl may do in innocence, and some—that no one but a wicked woman of the world—— Oh, you are young to be called such a name. I oughtn't, at your age, however I may suffer by you, to call you such a name.'

'You may call me what name you like. Fortunately I have not to look to you as my judge. Look here,' cried Constance, springing to her feet. 'You say you are a woman yourself. I am not like Frances, a girl that knew nothing. If your son is at my feet, I have had better men at my feet, richer men, far better matches than Captain Gaunt. Would any one in their senses expect *me* to marry a poor soldier, to go out to India, to follow the regiment? You forget I'm Lady Markham's daughter as well as Mr. Waring's. Put yourself in her place for a moment, and think what you would say if your daughter told you that was what she was going to do. To marry a poor man, not even at home—an officer in India! What would you say? You would lock me up in my room, and keep me on bread and water. You would say, the girl is mad. At least that is what my mother, if she could, would do.'

Mrs. Gaunt caught upon the point which was most salient and attackable. 'An Indian officer!' she cried. 'That shows how little you know. He is not an Indian officer—he is a Queen's officer: not that it matters. There were men in the Company's service that—— The Company's service was—— How dare you speak so to me? General Gaunt was in the Company's service!' she cried, with an outburst of injured feeling and excited pride.

To this Constance made reply with a mocking laugh, which nearly drove her adversary frantic, and resumed her seat, having said what she had to say.

Poor Mrs. Gaunt sat down, too, in sheer inability to support herself. Her limbs trembled under her. She wanted to cry, but would not, had she died in that act of self-restraint. And as she could not have said another word without crying, force was upon her to keep silence, though her heart burned. After an interval, she said, tremulously, 'If this is one of our punishments for Eve's fault, it's far, far harder to bear than the other; and every woman has to bear it more or less. To see a man that ought to make one woman's happiness turned into a jest by another woman, and made a laughing-stock of, and all his innocent pleasure turned into bitterness. Why did you do it? Were there not plenty of men in the world that you should take my boy for your plaything? Wasn't there room for you in London, that you should come here? Oh, what possessed you to come here, where no one wanted you, and spoil all?'

Constance turned round and stared at her accuser with troubled eyes. It was a question to which it was difficult to give any answer; and she could not deny that it was a very pertinent question. No one had wanted her. There had been room for her in London, and a recognised place, and everything a girl could desire. Oh, how she desired now those things which belonged to her, which she had left so lightly, which there was nothing here to replace! Why had she left them? If a wish could have taken her back, out of this foreign, alien, unloved scene, away from Mrs. Gaunt, scolding her in the big hat and shawl, which would be only fit for a charade at home, to Lady Markham's soft and lovely presence—to Claude, even poor Claude, with his beautiful eyes and his fear of draughts—how swiftly would she have travelled, through the air! But a wish would not do it; and she could only stare at her assailant blankly, and in her heart echo the question, Why, oh why?

Notwithstanding this stormy interview, Constance had so far recovered by the afternoon, and was so utterly destitute of anything else by way of amusement, that she walked down to the railway station at the hour when the train started for Marseilles and England, with a perfectly composed and smiling countenance, and the little parcel for Frances under her arm. Mrs. Gaunt was like a woman turned to stone when she suddenly saw this apparition, standing upon the platform, talking to her old general, amusing and occupying him so that he almost forgot that he was here on no joyful but a melancholy occasion. And to see George hurry forward, his dark face lit up with a sudden glow, his hat in his hand, as if he were about to address the Queen! These are things which are very hard upon women, to whom it is generally given to preserve their senses even when the most seductive siren smiles.

'You would not come to say good-bye to me, so I had to take it into my own hands,' Constance said, in her clear young voice, which was to be heard quite distinctly through all the jabber of the Riviera functionaries. 'And here is the little parcel for Frances, if you will be so very good. *Do* go and see them, Captain Gaunt.'

'Of course he will go and see them,' said the General—'too glad. He has not so many people to see in town that he should forget our old friend Waring's near connections, and Frances, whom we were all so fond of. And you may be sure he will be honoured by any commissions you will give him.'

'Oh, I have no commissions. Markham does my commissions when I have any. He is the best of brothers in that respect. Give my love to mamma, Captain Gaunt. She will like to see some one who has seen me. Tell her I get on—pretty well. Tell them all to come out here.'

'He must not do that, Miss Waring; for it will soon be too hot, and we are all going away.'

'Oh, I was not in earnest,' said Constance; 'it was only a little jest. I must look too sincere for anything, for people are always taking my little jokes as if I meant them, every word.' She raised her eyes to Captain Gaunt as she spoke, and with one steady look made an end in a moment of all the hasty hopes that had sprung up again in less time than Jonah's gourd. She put the parcel in his charge, and shook hands with him, taking no notice of his sudden change of countenance,—and not only this, but waited a little way off till the poor young fellow had got into the train, and had been taken farewell of by his parents. Then she waved her hand and a little film of a pocket-handkerchief, and waited till the old pair came out, Mrs. Gaunt with very red eyes, and even the General blowing his nose unnecessarily.

'It seems only the other day that we came down to meet him—after not seeing him for so many years.'

'Oh, my poor boy! But I should not mind if I thought he had got any good out of his holiday,' said Mrs. Gaunt, launching a burning look among her tears at the siren.

'Oh, I think he has enjoyed himself, Mrs. Gaunt. I am sure you need not have any burden on your mind on that account,' the young deceiver said smoothly.

Yes, he had enjoyed himself, and now had to pay the price of it in disappointment and ineffectual misery. This was all it had brought him, this brief intoxicating dream, this fool's paradise. Constance walked with them as far as their way lay together, and 'talked very nicely,' as he said afterwards, to the General; but Mrs. Gaunt, if she could have done it with a wish, would have willingly pitched this siren, where other sirens belong to—into the sea.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

AND Constance, too, had found it amusing—she did not hesitate to acknowledge that to herself. She had got a great deal of diversion out of these six weeks. There had been nothing, really, when you came to think of it, to amuse anybody: a few dull walks; a drive along the dusty roads, which were more dusty than anything she had ever experienced in her life; and then a ramble among the hills, a climb from terrace to terrace of the olive-gardens, or through the stony streets of a little mountain town. It was the contrast, the harmony, the antagonism, the duel and the companionship continually going on, which had given everything its zest. The scientific man with an exciting object under the microscope, the astronomer with his new star pulsing out of the depths of the sky, could scarcely have been more absorbed than Constance. Not so much; for not the most cherished of star-fishes, not the most glorious of stars, is so exciting as it is to watch the risings and flowings of emotion under your own hand, to feel that you can cause ecstasy or despair, and raise up another human creature to the heights of delight, or drop him to depths beneath purgatory, at your will. When the young and cruel possess this power—and the very young are often cruel by ignorance, by inability to understand suffering—they are seldom clever enough to use it to the full extent. But Constance was clever, and had tasted blood before. It had made the time pass as nothing else could have done. It had carried on a thread of keen interest through all these commonplace pursuits. It had been as amusing, nay, much more so than if she had loved him; for she got the advantage of his follies without sharing them, and felt herself to stand high in cool ethereal light, while the unfortunate young man turned himself outside in for her enlightenment. She had enjoyed herself—she did not deny it; but now there was the penalty to pay.

He was gone, clean gone, escaped from her power; and nothing was left but the beggarly elements of this small bare life, in which there was nothing to amuse or interest. The roads were more intolerable than ever, lying white in heat and dust, which rose in clouds round every carriage—carriage! that was an euphemism—cab which passed. The sun blazed everywhere, so that one thought regretfully of the dull skies of England, and charitably of the fogs and rains. There was nothing to do but to go up among the olives and sit down upon some ledge and look at the sea. Constance did not draw, neither did she read. She did nothing that could be of any use to her here. She regretted now that she had allowed herself at the very beginning to fall into the snare of that amusement, too ready to her hand, which consisted of Captain Gaunt. It had been a mistake—if for no other reason, at least because it left the dulness more dull than ever, now it was over. He it was who had been her resource, his looks and ways her study, the gradual growth of his love the romance which had kept her going. She asked herself sometimes whether she could possibly have done as much harm to him as to herself by this indulgence, and answered earnestly, No. How could it do him any harm? He was vexed, of course, for the moment, because he could not have her; but very soon he would come to. He would be a fool, more of a fool than she thought him, if he did not soon see that it was much better for him that she had thought only of a little amusement. Why should he marry, a young man with very little money? There could be no doubt it would have been a great mistake. Constance did not know what society in India is like, but she supposed it must be something like society at home, and in that case there was no doubt he would have found it altogether more difficult had he gone back a married man.

She could not think, looking at the subject dispassionately, how he could ever have wished it. An unmarried young man (she reflected) gets asked to a great many places, where the people could not be troubled with a pair. And whereas some girls may be promoted by marriage, it is *almost always* to the disadvantage of a young man. So, why should he make a fuss about it, this young woman of the world asked herself. He ought to have been very glad that he had got his amusement and no penalty to pay. But for herself, she was sorry. Now he was gone, there was nobody to talk to, nobody to walk with, no means of amusement at all. She did not know what to do with herself, while he was speeding to dear London. What was she to do with herself? Filial piety and the enjoyment of her own thoughts—without anything to do even for her father, or any subject to employ her thoughts upon—these were all that seemed to be left to her in her life. The tourists and invalids were all gone, so that there was not even the chance of somebody turning up at the hotels; and even the Gaunts—between whom and herself there was now a gulf fixed—and the Durants, who were bores unspeakable, were going away. What was she to do?

Alas, that exhilarating game which had ended so sadly for George Gaunt was not ending very cheerfully for Constance. It had made life too tolerable—it had kept her in a pleasant self-deception as to the reality of the lot she had chosen. Now that reality flashed upon her,—nay, the word is far too animated—it did not flash, nothing any longer flashed, except that invariable, intolerable sun,—it opened upon her dully, with its long, long, endless vistas. The still rooms in the Palazzo with the green *persiani* closed, all blazing sunshine without, all dead stillness and darkness within—and nothing to do, nobody to see, nothing to give a fresh turn to her thoughts. Not a novel even! Papa's old books upon out-of-the-way subjects, dreary as the dusty road, endless as the uneventful days—and papa himself, the centre of all. When she turned this over and over in her mind, it seemed to her that if, when she first came, instead of being seduced into flowery paths of flirtation, she had paid a little attention to her father, it might have been better for her now. But that chance was over, and George Gaunt was gone, and only dulness remained behind.

And oh, how different it must be in town, where the season was just beginning, and Frances, that little country thing, who would care nothing about it, was going to be presented! Constance, it is scarcely necessary to say, had been told what her sister was to wear; indeed, having gone through the ceremony herself, and knowing exactly what was right, could have guessed without being told. How would Frances look with her little demure face and her neat little figure? Constance had no unkindly feeling towards her sister. She fully recognised the advantages of the girl, who was like mamma; and whose youthful freshness would be enhanced by the good looks of the little stately figure beside her, showing the worst that Frances was likely to come to, even when she got old. Constance knew very well that this was a great advantage to a girl, having heard the frank remarks of Society upon those beldams who lead their young daughters into the world, presenting in their own persons a horrible caricature of what those girls may grow to be. But Frances would look very well, the poor exile decided, sitting on the low wall of one of the terraces, gazing through the gray olives over the blue sea. She would look very well. She would be frightened, yet amused, by the show. She would be admired—by people who liked that quiet kind. Markham would be with them; and Claude, perhaps Claude, if it was a fine day, and there was no east in the wind! She stopped to laugh to herself at this suggestion, but her colour rose at the same time, and an angry question woke in her mind. Claude! She had told Mrs. Gaunt she was engaged to him still. Was she engaged to him? Or had he thrown her off, as she threw him off, and perhaps found consolation in Frances? At this thought the olive-gardens in their coolness grew intolerable, and the sea the dreariest of prospects. She jumped up, and notwithstanding the sun and the dust, went down the broad road, the old Roman way, where there was no shade nor shelter. It was not safe, she said to herself, to be left there with her thoughts. She must break the spell or die.

She went, of all places in the world, poor Constance! to the Durants' in search of a little variety. Their loggia also was covered with an awning; but they did not venture into it till the sun was going down. They had their tea-table in the drawing-room, which, till the eyes grew accustomed to it, was quite dark, with one ray of subdued light stealing in from the open door of the loggia, but the blinds all closed and the windows. Here Constance was directed, by the glimmer of reflection in the teapot and china, to the spot where the family were sitting, Mrs. Durant and Tasie languidly waving their fans. The *dolce far niente* was not appreciated in that clerical house. Tasie thought it her duty to be always doing something—knitting at least for a bazaar, if it was not light enough for other work. But the heat had overcome even Tasie; though it could not, if it had been tropical, do away with the little furnace of the hot tea. They all received Constance with the languid delight of people in an atmosphere of ninety degrees, to whom no visitor has appeared, nor any incident happened, all day.

'Oh, Miss Waring,' said Tasie, 'we have just had a great disappointment. Some one sent us the *Queen* from home, and we looked directly for the drawing-room, to see Frances' name and how she was dressed; but it is not there.'

'No,' said Constance; 'the 29th is her day.'

'Oh, that is what I said, mamma. I said we must have mistaken the date. It couldn't be that there was any mistake about going, when she wrote and told us. I knew the date must be wrong.'

'Many things may occur at the last moment to stop one, Tasie. I have known a lady with her dress all ready laid out on the bed; and circumstances happened so that she could not go.'

'That is by no means a singular experience, my dear,' said Mr. Durant, who in his black coat was almost invisible. 'I have known many such cases; and in matters more important than drawing-rooms.'

'There was the Sangazures,' said the clergyman's wife—'don't you recollect? Lady Alice was just putting on her bonnet to go to her daughter's marriage, when——'

'It is really unnecessary to recall so many examples,' said

Constance. 'No doubt they are all quite true; but as a matter of fact, in this case the date was the 29th.'

'Oh, I hope,' said Tasie, 'that somebody will send us another *Queen;* for I should be so sorry to miss seeing about Frances. Have you heard, Miss Waring, how she is to be dressed?'

'It will be the usual white business,' said Constance, calmly.

'You mean—all white? Yes, I suppose so; and the material, silk or satin, with tulle? Oh yes, I have no doubt; but to see it all written down, with the drapings and *bouillonnés* and all that, makes it so much more real. Don't you think so? Dear Frances, she always looked so nice in white—which is trying to many people. I really cannot wear white, for my part.'

Constance looked at her with a scarcely concealed smile. She was not tolerant of the old-young lady, as Frances was. Her eyes meant mischief as they made out the sandy complexion, the uncertain hair, which were so unlike Frances' clear little face and glossy brown satin locks. But, fortunately, the eloquence of looks did not tell for much in that closely shuttered dark room. And Constance's nerves, already so jarred and strained, responded with another keen vibration when Mrs. Durant's voice suddenly came out of the gloom with a bland question: 'And when are you moving? Of course, like all the rest, you must be on the wing.'

'Where should we be going? I don't think we are going anywhere,' she said.

'My dear Miss Waring, that shows, if you will let me say so, how little you know of our climate here. You must go: in the summer it is intolerable. We have stayed a little longer than usual this year. My husband takes the duty at Homburg every summer, as perhaps you are aware.'

'Oh, it is so much nicer there for the Sunday work,' said Tasie; 'though I love dear little Bordighera too. But the Sunday school is a trial. To give up one's afternoons and take a great deal of trouble for perhaps three children! Of course, papa, I know it is my duty.'

'And quite as much your duty, if there were but one; for, think, if you saved but one soul,—is that not worth living for, Tasie?' Mr. Durant said.

'Oh yes, yes, papa. I only say it is a little hard. Of course that is the test of duty. Tell Frances, please, when you write, Miss Waring, there is to be a bazaar for the new church; and I daresay she could send or do me something—two or three of her nice little sketches. People like that sort of thing. Generally things at bazaars are so useless. Knitted things, everybody has got such shoals of them; but a water-colour—you know that always sells.'

'I will tell Fan,' said Constance, 'when I write—but that is not often. We are neither of us very good correspondents.'

'You should tell your papa,' went on Mrs. Durant, 'of that little place which I always say I discovered, Miss Waring. Such a nice little place, and quite cool and cheap. Nobody goes; there is not a tourist passing by once in a fortnight. Mr. Waring would like it, I know. Don't you think Mr. Waring would like it, papa?'

'That depends, my dear, upon so many circumstances over which he has no control—such as, which way the wind is blowing, and if he has the books he wants, and——'

'Papa, you must not laugh at Mr. Waring. He is a dear. I will not hear a word that is not nice of Mr. Waring,' cried Tasie.

This championship of her father was more than Constance could bear. She rose from her seat quickly, and declared that she must go.

'So soon?' said Mrs. Durant, holding the hand which Constance had held out to her, and looking up with keen eyes and spectacles. 'And we have not said a word yet of the event, and all about it, and why it was. But I think we can give a guess at why it was.'

'What event?' Constance said, with chill surprise: as if she cared what was going on in their little world!

'Ah, how can you ask me, my dear? The last event, that took us all so much by surprise I am afraid, I am sadly afraid, you are not without blame.'

'Oh mamma! Miss Waring will think we do nothing but gossip. But you must remember there is so little going on, that we can't help remarking—— And perhaps it was quite true what they said, that poor Captain Gaunt——'

'Oh, if it is anything about Captain Gaunt,' said Constance, hastily withdrawing her hand; 'I know so little about the people here——'

Tasie followed her to the door. 'You must not mind,' she said, 'what mamma says. She does not mean anything—it is only her way. She always thinks there must be reasons for things. Now I,' said Tasie, 'know that very often there are no reasons for anything.' Having uttered this oracle, she allowed the visitor to go down-stairs. 'And you will not forget to tell Frances,' she said, looking over the balustrade. In a little house like that of the Durants the stairs in England would have been wood, and shabby ones; but here they were marble, and of imposing appearance. 'Any little thing I should be thankful for,' said Tasie; 'or she might pick up a few trifles from one of the Japanese shops; but water-colours are what I should prefer. Good-bye, dear Miss Waring. Oh, it is not good-bye for good; I shall certainly come to see you before we go away!'

Constance had not gone half-way along the Marina when she met General Gaunt, who looked grave, but yet greeted her kindly. 'We are going to-morrow,' he said. 'My wife is so very busy, I do not know if she will be able to find time to call to say good-bye.'

'I hope you don't think so badly of me as she does, General Gaunt?'

'Badly, my dear young lady! You must know that is impossible,' said the old soldier, shuffling a little from one foot to the other. And then he added, 'Ladies are a little unreasonable. And if they think you have interfered with the little finger of a child of theirs—— But I hope you will let me have the pleasure of paying my farewell visit in the morning.'

'Good-bye, General,' Constance said. She held her head high, and walked proudly away past all the empty hotels and shops, not heeding the sun, which still played down upon her, though from a lower level. She cared nothing for these people, she said to herself vehemently: and yet the mere feeling of the farewells in the air added a forlorn aspect to the stagnation of the place. Everybody was going away except her father and herself. She felt as if the preparations and partings, and all the pleasure of Tasie in the 'work' elsewhere, and her little fussiness about the bazaar, were all offences to herself, Constance, who was not thought good enough even to ask a contribution from. No one thought Constance good for anything, except to blame her for ridiculous impossibilities, such as not marrying Captain Gaunt. It seemed that this was the only thing which she was supposed capable of doing. And while all the other people went away, she was to stay here to be burned brown, and perhaps to get fever, unused as she was to a blazing summer like this. She had to stay here—she, who was so young and could enjoy everything—while all the old people, to whom it could not matter very much, went away. She felt angry, offended, miserable, as she went in and got herself ready mechanically for dinner. She knew her father would take no notice,—would probably receive the news of the departure of the others without remark. He cared nothing, not nearly so much as about a new book. And she, throbbing with pain, discomfiture, loneliness, and anger, was alone to bear the burden of this stillness, and of the uninhabited world.

## CHAPTER XL

WARING was not so indifferent to the looks or feelings of his daughter as appeared. After all, he was not entirely buried in his books. To Frances, who had grown up by his side without particularly attracting his attention, he had been kindly indifferent, not feeling any occasion to concern himself about the child, who always had managed to amuse herself, and never had made any call upon him. But Constance had come upon him as a stranger, as an individual with a character and faculties of her own, and it had not been without curiosity that he had watched her to see how she would reconcile herself with the new circumstances. Her absorption in the amusement provided for her by young Gaunt had somewhat revolted her father, who set it down as one of the usual exhibitions of love in idleness, which every one sees by times as he makes his way through the world. He had not interfered, being thoroughly convinced that interference is useless, in addition to that reluctance to do anything which had grown upon him in his recluse life. But since Gaunt had disappeared without a sign—save that of a little irritability, a little unusual gravity on the part of Constance—her father had been roused somewhat to ask what it meant. Had the young fellow 'behaved badly,' as people say? Had he danced attendance upon her all this time only to leave her at the end? It did not seem possible, when he looked at Constance with her easy air of mastery, and thought of the shy, eager devotion of the young soldier and his impassioned looks. But yet he was aware that in such cases all prognostics failed, that the conqueror was sometimes conquered, and the intended victim remained master of the field. Waring observed his daughter more closely than ever on this evening. She was *distraite*, self-absorbed, a little impatient, sometimes not noting what he said to her, sometimes answering in an irritable tone. The replies she made to him when she did reply showed that her mind was running on other matters. She said abruptly, in the middle of a little account he was giving her, with the idea of amusing her, of one of the neighbouring mountain castles, 'Do you know, papa, that everybody is going away?'

Waring felt, with a certain discomfiture, which was comic, yet annoying, like one who has been suddenly pulled up with a good deal of 'way' on him, and stops himself with difficulty—'a branch of the old Dorias,' he went on, having these words in his very mouth; and then, after a precipitate pause, 'Eh? Oh, everybody is——? Yes, I know. They always do at this time of the year.'

'It will be rather miserable, don't you think, when every one is gone?'

'My dear Constance, "every one" means the Gaunts and Durants. I could not have supposed you cared.'

'For the Gaunts and Durants—oh no,' said Constance. 'But to think there is not a soul—no one to speak to—not even the clergyman, not even Tasie.' She laughed, but there was a certain look of alarm in her face, as if the emergency was one which was unprecedented. 'That frightens one, in spite of one's self. And what are we going to do?'

It was Waring now who hesitated, and did not know how to reply. 'We!' he said. 'To tell the truth, I had not thought of it. Frances was always quite willing to stay at home.'

'But I am not Frances, papa.'

'I beg your pardon, my dear; that is quite true. Of course I never supposed so. You understand that for myself I prefer always not to be disturbed—to go on as I am. But you, a young lady fresh from Society—— Had I supposed that you cared for the Durants, for instance, I should have thought of some way of making up for their absence; but I thought, on the whole, you would prefer their absence.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' said Constance. 'I don't care for the individuals—they are all rather bores. Captain Gaunt,' she added, resolutely, introducing the name with determination, 'became very much of a bore before he went away. But the thing is to have nobody—nobody! One has to put up with bores very often; but to have nobody, actually not a soul! The circumstances are quite unprecedented.'

There was something in her air as she said this which amused her father. It was the air of a social philosopher brought to a pause in the face of an unimagined dilemma, rather than of a young lady stranded upon a desert shore where no society was to be found.

'No doubt,' he said, 'you never knew anything of the kind before.'

'Never,' said Constance, with warmth. 'People who are a nuisance, often enough; but *nobody*, never before.'

'I prefer nobody,' said her father.

She raised her eyes to him, as if he were one of the problems to which, for the first time, her attention was seriously called. 'Perhaps,' she said; 'but then you are not in a natural condition, papa—no more than a hermit in the desert, who has forsworn Society altogether.'

'Allowing that I am abnormal, Constance, for the argument's sake——'

'And so was Frances, more or less—that is, she could content herself with the peasants and fishermen, who, of course, are just as good as anybody else, if you make up your mind to it, and understand their ways. But I am not abnormal,' Constance said, her colour rising a little. 'I want the society of my own kind. It seems unnatural to you, probably, just as your way of thinking seems unnatural to me.'

'I have seen both ways,' said Waring, in his turn becoming animated; 'and so far as my opinion goes, the peasants and fishermen are a thousand times better than what you call Society; and solitude, with one's own thoughts and pursuits, the best of all.'

There was a momentary pause, and then Constance said, 'That may be, papa. What is best in the abstract is not the question. In that way, mere nothing would be the best of all, for there could be no harm in it.'

'Nor any good.'

'That is what I mean on my side—nor any good. It might be better to be alone—then (I suppose) you would never be bored, never feel the need of anything, the mere sound of a voice, some one going by. That may be your way of thinking, but it is not mine. If one has no society, one had better die at once and save trouble. That is what I should like to do.'

A certain feminine confusion in her argument, produced by haste and the stealing in of personal feeling, stopped Constance, who was too clear-headed not to see when she had got involved. Her confusion had the usual effect of touching her temper and causing a little *crise* of sentiment. The tears came to her eyes. She could be heroic, and veil her personal grievances like a social martyr so long as this was necessary in presence of the world; but in the present case it was not necessary: it was better, in fact, to let nature have its way.

'That will not be necessary, I hope,' said Waring, somewhat coldly. He thought of Frances with a sigh, who never bothered him, who was contented with everything! and carried on her own little thoughts, whatever they might be, her little drawings, her little life, so tranquilly, knowing nothing better. What was he to do, with the responsibility upon his hands of this other creature? whom all the same he could not shake off, nor even—as a gentleman, if not as a father—allow to perceive what an embarrassment she was. 'Without going so far,' he said, 'we must consult what is best to be done, since you feel it so keenly. My ordinary habits even of *villeggiatura* would not please you any better than staying at home, I fear. We used to go up to Dolceacqua, Frances and I; or to Eza; or to Porto Fino, on the opposite coast,—at no one of which places was there a soul—as you reckon souls—to be seen.'

'That is a great pity,' said Constance; 'for even Frances, though she may have been a Stoic born, must have wanted to see a human creature who spoke English now and then.'

'A Stoic! It never occurred to me that she was a Stoic,' said Waring, with astonishment, and a sudden sense of offence. The idea that his little Frances was not perfectly happy, that she had anything to put up with, anything to forgive, was intolerable to him; and it was a new idea. He reflected that she had consented to go away with an ease which surprised him at the time. Was it possible? This suggestion disturbed him much in his certainty that his was absolutely the right way.

'If all these expedients are unsatisfactory,' he said, sharply, 'perhaps you will come to my assistance, and tell me where you would be satisfied to go.'

'Papa,' said Constance, 'I am going to make a suggestion which is a very bold one; perhaps you will be angry—but I don't do it to make you angry; and, please, don't answer me till you have thought a moment. It is just this—Why shouldn't we go home?'

'Go home!' The words flew from him in the shock and wonder. He grew pale as he stared at her, too much thunderstruck to be angry, as she said.

Constance put up her hand to stop him. 'I said, please don't answer till you have thought.'

And then they sat for a minute or more looking at each other from opposite sides of the table—in that pause which comes when a new and strange thought has been thrown into the midst of a turmoil which it has power to excite or to allay. Waring went through a great many phases of feeling while he looked at his young daughter sitting undaunted opposite to him, not afraid of him, treating him as no one else had done for years—as an equal, as a reasonable being, whose wishes were not to be deferred to superstitiously, but whose reasons for what he did and said were to be put to the test, as in the case of other men. And he knew that he could not beat down this cool and self-possessed girl, as fathers can usually crush the young creatures whom they have had it in their power to reprove and correct from their cradles. Constance was an independent intelligence. She was a gentlewoman, to whom he could not be rude any more than to the Queen. This hushed at once the indignant outcry on his lips. He said at last, calmly enough, with only a little sneer piercing through his forced smile, 'We must take care, like other debaters, to define what we mean exactly by the phrases we use. Home, for example. What do you mean by home? My home, in the ordinary sense of the word, is here.'

'My dear father,' said Constance, with the air, somewhat exasperated by his folly, of a philosopher with a neophyte, 'I wish you would put the right names to things. Yes, it is quite necessary to define, as you say. How can an Englishman, with all his duties in his own country, deriving his income from it, with houses belonging to him, and relations, and everything that makes up life—how can he, I ask you, say that home, in the ordinary sense of the word, is here? What is the ordinary sense of the word?' she said, after a pause—looking at him with the indignant frown of good sense, and that little air of repressed exasperation, as of the wiser towards the foolisher, which made Waring, in the midst of his own just anger and equally just discomfiture, feel a certain amusement too. He kept his temper with the greatest pains and care. Domenico had left the room when the discussion began, and the lamp which hung over the table lighted impartially the girl's animated countenance, pressing forward in the strength of a position which she felt to be invulnerable, and the father's clouded and withdrawing face,—for he had taken his eyes from her, with unconscious cowardice, when she fixed him with that unwavering gaze.

'I will allow that you put the position very strongly—as well as a little undutifully,' he said.

'Undutifully? Is it one's duty to one's father to be silly—to give up one's power of judging what is wrong and what is right? I am sure, papa, you are much too candid a thinker to suggest that.'

What could he say? He was very angry; but this candid thinker took him quite at unawares. It tickled while it defied him. And he was a very candid thinker, as she said. Perhaps he had been treated illogically in the great crisis of his life; for, as a matter of fact, when an argument was set before him, when it was a good argument, even if it told against him, he would never refuse to acknowledge it. And conscience, perhaps, had said to him on various occasions what his daughter now said. He could bring forward nothing against it. He could only say, I choose it to be so; and this would bear no weight with Constance. 'You are not a bad dialectician,' he said. 'Where did you learn your logic? Women are not usually strong in that point.'

'Women are said to be just what it pleases men to represent them,' said Constance. 'Listen, papa. Frances would not have said that to you that I have just said. Why don't you know that she would have thought it all the same? Because it is quite evident and certain, you know. What did you say the other day of that Italian, that Count something or other, who has the castle there on the hill, and never comes near it from one year's end to another?'

'That is quite a different matter. There is no reason why he should not spend a part of every year there.'

'And what reason is there with you? Only what ought to be an additional reason for going—that you have——' Here Constance paused a little, and grew pale. And her father looked up at her, growing pale too, anticipating a crisis. Another word, and he would be able to crush this young rebel, this meddler with things which concerned her not. But Constance was better advised; she said hurriedly—'relations and dependants, and ever so many things to look to—things that cannot be settled without you.'

'And what may these be?' He had been so fully prepared for the introduction at this point of the mother, from whom Constance, too, had fled—the wife, who was, as he said to himself, the cause of all that was inharmonious in his own life—that the withdrawal of her name left him breathless, with the force of an impulse which was not needed. 'What are the things that cannot be settled without me?'

'Well—for one thing, papa, your daughter's marriage,' said Constance, still looking at him steadily, but with a sudden glow of colour covering her face.

'My daughter's marriage?' he repeated, vaguely, once more taken by surprise. 'What! has Frances already, in the course of a few weeks——?'

'It is very probable,' said Constance, calmly. 'But I was not thinking of Frances. Perhaps you forget that I am your daughter too, and that your sanction is needed for me as well as for her.'

Here Waring leant towards her over the table. 'Is this how it has ended?' he said. 'Have you really so little perception of what is possible for a girl of your breeding, as to think that a life in India with young Gaunt——?'

Constance grew crimson from her hair to the edge of her white dress. 'Captain Gaunt?' she said, for the first time avoiding her father's eye. Then she burst into a laugh, which she felt was weak and half hysterical in its self-consciousness. 'Oh no,' she said; 'that was only amusement—that was nothing. I hope, indeed, I have a little more—perception, as you say. What I meant was——' Her eyes took a softened look, almost of entreaty, as if she wanted him to help her out.

'I did not know you had any second string to your bow,' he said. Now was his time to avenge himself, and he took advantage of it.

'Papa,' said Constance, drawing herself up majestically, 'I have no second string to my bow. I have made a mistake. It is a thing which may happen to any one. But when one does so, and sees it, the thing to do is to acknowledge and remedy it, I think. Some people, I am aware, are not of the same opinion. But I, for one, am not going to keep it up.'

'You refer to—a mistake which has not been acknowledged?'

'Papa, don't let us quarrel, you and me. I am very lonely—oh, dreadfully lonely! I want you to stand by me. What I refer to is my affair, not any one's else. I find out now that Claude—of course I told you his name—Claude—would suit me very well—better than any one else. There are drawbacks, perhaps; but I understand him, and he understands me. That is the great thing, isn't it?'

'It is a great thing—if it lasts.'

'Oh, it would last. I know him as well as I know myself.'

'I see,' said Waring, slowly. 'You have made up your mind to return to England, and accomplish the destiny laid out for you. A very wise resolution, no doubt. It is only a pity that you did not think better of it at first, instead of turning my life upside down and causing everybody so much trouble. Never mind. It is to be hoped that your resolution will hold now; and there need be no more trouble in that case about finding a place in which to pass the summer. *You* are going, I presume—home?'

This time the tears came very visibly to Constance's eyes. There was impatience and vexation in them, as well as feeling. 'Where is home?' she said. 'I will have to ask you. The home I have been used to is my sister's now. Oh, it is hard, I see, very hard, when you have made a mistake once, to mend it! The only home that I know of is an old house where the master has not been for a long time—which is all overgrown with trees, and tumbling into ruins for anything I know. But I suppose, unless you forbid me, that I have a right to go there—and perhaps Aunt Caroline——'

'Of what are you speaking?' he said, making an effort to keep his voice steady.

'I am speaking of Hilborough, papa.'

At this he sprang up from his chair, as if touched by some intolerable recollection; then composing himself, sat down again, putting force upon himself, restraining the sudden impulse of excitement. After a time, he said, 'Hilborough. I had almost forgotten the name.'

'Yes,—so I thought. You forget that you have a home, which is cooler and quieter, as quiet as any of your villages here—where you could be as solitary as you liked, or see people if you liked—where you are the natural master. Oh, I thought you must have forgotten it! In summer it is delightful. You are in the middle of a wood, and yet you are in a nice English house. Oh, an *English* house is very different from those Palazzos. Papa, there is your *villeggiatura*, as you call it, just what you want, far, far better than Mrs. Durant's cheap little place, that she asked me to tell you of, or Mrs. Gaunt's *pension* in Switzerland, or Homburg. They think you are poor; but you know quite well you are not poor. Take me to Hilborough, papa; oh, take me home! It is there I want to go.'

'Hilborough,' he repeated to himself—'Hilborough. I never thought of that. I suppose she *has* a right to it. Poor old place! Yes, I suppose, if the girl chooses to call it home——'

He rose up quite slowly this time, and went, as was his usual custom, towards the door which led through the other rooms to the loggia, but without paying any attention to the movements of Constance, which he generally followed instead of directing. She rose too, and went to him, and stole her hand through his arm. The awning had been put aside, and the soft night-air blew in their faces as they stepped out upon that terrace in which so much of their lives was spent. The sea shone beyond the roofs of the houses on the Marina, and swept outwards in a pale clearness towards the sky, which was soft in summer blue, with the stars sprinkled faintly over the vast vault, too much light still remaining in heaven and earth to show them at their best. Constance walked with her father, close to his side, holding his arm, almost as tall as he was, and keeping step and pace with him. She said nothing more, but stood by him as he walked to the ledge of the loggia and looked out towards the west, where there was still a lingering touch of gold. He was not at all in the habit of expressing admiration of the landscape, but to-night, as if he were making a remark called forth by the previous argument, 'It is all very lovely,' he said.

'Yes; but not more lovely than home,' said the girl. 'I have been at Hilborough in a summer night, and everything was so sweet—the stars all looking through the trees as if they were watching the house—and the scent of the flowers. Don't you remember the white rose at Hilborough—what they call Mother's tree?'

He started a little, and a thrill ran through him. She could feel it in his arm—a thrill of recollection, of things beyond the warfare and turmoil of his life, on the other, the boyish side—recollections of quiet and of peace.

'I think I will go to my own room a little, Constance, and smoke my cigarette there. You have brought a great many things to my mind.'

She gave his arm a close pressure before she let it go. 'Oh, take me to Hilborough! Let us go to our own home, papa.'

'I will think of it,' he replied.

## CHAPTER XLI

FRANCES ate a mournful little dinner alone, after the agitations to which she had been subject. Her mother did not return; and Markham, who had been expected up to the last moment, did not appear. It was unusual to her now to spend so many hours alone, and her mind was oppressed not only by the strange scene with Nelly Winterbourn, but more deeply still by Claude's news. George Gaunt had always been a figure of great interest to Frances; and his appearance here in the world which was as yet so strange, with his grave, indeed melancholy face, had awakened her to a sense of sympathy and friendliness which no one had called forth in her before. He was as strange as she was to that dazzling puzzle of society, sat silent as she did, roused himself into interest like her about matters which did not much interest anybody else. She had felt amid so many strangers that here was one whom she could always understand, whose thoughts she could follow, who said what she had been about to say. It made no difference to Frances that he had not signalled her out for special notice. She took that quietly, as a matter of course. Her mother, Markham, the other people who appeared and disappeared in the house, were all more interesting, she felt, than she; but sometimes her eyes had met those of Captain Gaunt in sympathy, and she had perceived that he could understand her, whether he wished to do so or not. And then he was Mrs. Gaunt's youngest, of whom she had heard so much. It seemed to Frances that his childhood and her own had got all entangled, so that she could not be quite sure whether this and that incident of the nursery had been told of him or of herself. She was more familiar with him than he could be with her. And to hear that he was unhappy, that he was in danger, a stranger among people who preyed upon him, and yet not to be able to help him, was almost more than she could bear.

She went up to the empty drawing-room, with the soft illumination of many lights, which was habitual there, which lay all decorated and bright, sweet with spring flowers, full of pictures and ornaments, like a deserted palace, and she felt the silence and beauty of it to be dreary and terrible. It was like a desert to her, or rather like a prison, in which she must stay and wait and listen, and, whatever might come, do nothing to hinder it. What could she do? A girl could not go out into those haunts, where Claude Ramsay, though he was so delicate, could go; she could not put herself forward, and warn a man, who would think he knew much better than she could do. She sat down and tried to read, and then got up, and glided about from one table to another, from one picture to another, looking vaguely at a score of things without seeing them. Then she stole within the shadow of the curtain, and looked out at the carriages which went and came, now and then drawing up at adjacent doors. It made her heart beat to see them approaching, to think that perhaps they were coming here—her mother perhaps; perhaps Sir Thomas; perhaps Markham. Was it possible that this night, of all others—this night, when her heart seemed to appeal to earth and heaven for some one to help her—nobody would come? It was Frances' first experience of these vigils, which to some women fill up so much of life. There had never been any anxiety at Bordighera, any disturbing influence. She had always known where to find her father, who could solve every problem and chase away every difficulty. Would he, she wondered, be able to do so now? Would he, if he were here, go out for her, and find George Gaunt, and deliver him from his pursuers? But Frances could not say to herself that he would have done so. He was not fond of disturbing himself. He would have said, 'It is not my business;' he would have refused to interfere, as Claude did. And what could she do, a girl, by herself? Lady Markham had been very anxious to keep him out of harm's way; but she had said plainly that she would not forsake her own son in order to save the son of another woman. Frances was wandering painfully through labyrinths of such thoughts, racking her brain with vain questions as to what it was possible to do, when Markham's hansom, stopping with a sudden clang at the door, drove her thoughts away, or at least made a break in them, and replaced, by a nervous tremor of excitement and alarm, the pangs of anxious expectation and suspense. She would rather not have seen Markham at that moment. She was fond of her brother. It grieved her to hear even Lady Markham speak of him in questionable terms: all the natural prejudices of affectionate youth were enlisted on his side; but, for the first time, she felt that she had no confidence in Markham, and wished that it had been any one but he.

He came in with a light overcoat over his evening clothes,—he had been dining out; but he did not meet Frances with the unembarrassed countenance which she had thought would have made it so difficult to speak to him about what she had heard. He came in hurriedly, looking round the drawing-room with a rapid investigating glance before he took any notice of her. 'Where is the mother?' he asked, hurriedly.

'She has not come back,' said Frances, divining from his look that it was unnecessary to say more.

Markham sat down abruptly on a sofa near. He did not make any reply to her, but put up the handle of his cane to his mouth with a curious mixture of the comic and the tragic, which struck her in spite of herself. He did not require to put any question; he knew very well where his mother was, and all that was happening. The sense of the great crisis which had arrived took from him all power of speech, paralysing him with mingled awe and dismay. But yet the odd little figure on the sofa, sucking his cane, his hat in his other hand, his features all fallen into bewilderment and helplessness, was absurd. Out of the depths of Frances' trouble came a hysterical titter against her will. This roused him also. He looked at her with a faint evanescent smile.

'Laughing at me, Fan? Well, I don't wonder. I am a nice fellow to have to do with a tragedy. Screaming farce is more like my style.'

'I did not laugh, Markham; I have not any heart for laughing,' she said.

'Oh, didn't you? But it sounded like it. Fan, tell me, has the mother been long away, and did any one see that unfortunate girl when she was here?'

'No, Markham—unless it were Mr. Ramsay; he saw her drive away with mamma.'

'The worst of old gossips,' he said, desperately sucking his cane, with a gloomy brow. 'I don't know an old woman so bad. No quarter there—that is the word. Fan, the mother is a trump. Nothing is so bad when she is mixed up in it. Was Nelly much cut up, or was she in one of her wild fits? Poor girl! You must not think badly of Nelly. She has had hard lines. She never had a chance: an old brute, used up, that no woman could take to. But she has done her duty by him, Fan.'

'She does not think so, Markham.'

'Oh, by Jove, she was giving you that, was she? Fan, I sometimes think poor Nelly's off her head a little. Poor Nelly, poor girl! I don't want to set her up for an example; but she has done her duty by him. Remember this, whatever you may hear. I—am rather a good one to know.'

He gave a curious little chuckle as he said this—a sort of strangled laugh, of which he was ashamed, and stifled it in its birth.

'Markham, I want to speak to you—about something very serious.'

He gave a keen look at her sideways from the corner of one eye. Then he said, in a sort of whisper to himself, 'Preaching;' but added in his own voice, 'Fire away, Fan,' with a look of resignation.

'Markham—it is about Captain Gaunt.'

'Oh!' he cried. He gave a little laugh. 'You frightened me, my dear. I thought at this time of the day you were going to give me a sermon from the depths of your moral experience, Fan. So long as it isn't about poor Nelly, say what you please about Gaunt. What about Gaunt?'

'Oh, Markham, Mr. Ramsay told me—and mamma has been frightened ever since he came. What have you done with him, Markham? Don't you remember the old General at Bordighera—and his mother? And he had just come from India, for his holiday, after years and years. And they are poor—that is to say, they are well enough off for them; but they are not like mamma and you. They have not got horses and carriages; they don't live—as you do.'

'As I do! I am the poorest little beggar living, and that is the truth, Fan.'

'The poorest! Markham, you may think you can laugh at me. I am not clever; I am quite ignorant—that I know. But how can you say you are poor? You don't know what it is to be poor. When they go away in the summer, they choose little quiet places; they spare everything they can. That is one thing I know better than you do. To say you are poor!'

He rose up and came towards her, and taking her hands in his, gave them a squeeze which was painful, though he was unconscious of it. 'Fan,' he said, 'all that is very pretty, and true for you; but if I hadn't been poor, do you think all this would have happened as it has done? Do you think I'd have stood by and let Nelly marry that fellow? Do you think——? Hush! there's the mother, with news; no doubt she's got news. Fan, what d'ye think it'll be?'

He held her hands tight, and pressed them till she had almost cried out, looking in her face with a sort of nervous smile which twitched at the corners of his mouth, looking in her eyes as if into a mirror where he could see the reflection of something, and so be spared the pain of looking directly at it. She saw that the subject which was of so much interest to her had passed clean out of his head. His own affairs were uppermost in Markham's mind, as is generally the case whenever a man can be supposed to have any affairs at all of his own.

And Frances, kept in this position, as a sort of mirror in which he could see the reflection of his mother's face, saw Lady Markham come in, looking very pale and fatigued, with that air of having worn her outdoor dress for hours which gives a sort of haggard aspect to weariness. She gave a glance round, evidently without perceiving very clearly who was there, then sank wearily upon the sofa, loosening her cloak. 'It is all over,' she said in a low tone, as if speaking to herself—'it is all over. Of course I could not come away before——'

Markham let go Frances' hands without a word. He walked away to the further window, and drew the curtain aside and looked out. Why, he could not have told, nor with what purpose—with a vague intention of making sure that the hansom which stood there so constantly was at the door.

'What is Markham doing?' said his mother, in a faint querulous tone. 'Tell him not to fidget with these curtains. It worries me. I am tired, and my nerves are all wrong. Yes, you can take my cloak, Frances. Don't call anybody. No one will come here to-night. Markham, did you hear what I said? It is all over. I waited till——'

He came towards her from the end of the room with a sort of smile upon his gray sandy-coloured face, his mouth and eyebrows twitching, his eyes screwed up so that nothing but two keen little glimmers of reflection were visible. 'You are not the sort,' he said, with a little tremor in his voice, 'to forsake a man when he is down.' He had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders pushed up; nowhere could there have been seen a less tragic figure. Yet every line of his odd face was touched and moving with feeling, totally beyond any power of expression in words.

'It was not a happy scene,' she said. 'He sent for her at the last. Sarah Winterbourn was there at the bedside. She was fond of him, I believe. A woman cannot help being fond of her brother, however little he may deserve it. Nelly——'

Here Markham broke in with a sound that was like, yet not like, his usual laugh. 'How's Nelly?' he said abruptly, without sequence or reason. Lady Markham paused to look at him, and then went on—

'Nelly trembled so, I could scarcely keep her up. She wanted not to go; she said, What was the good? But I got her persuaded at last. A man dying like that is a—is a—— It is not a pleasant sight. He signed to her to go and kiss him.' Lady Markham shuddered slightly. 'He was past speaking—I mean, he was past understanding—— I—I wish I had not seen it. One can't get such a scene out of one's mind.'

She put up her hand and pressed her fingers upon her eyes, as if the picture was there, and she was trying to get rid of it. Markham had turned away again, and was examining, or seeming to examine, the flowers in a jardinière. Now and then he made a movement, as if he would have stopped the narrative. Frances, trembling and crying with natural horror and distress, had loosened her mother's cloak and taken off her bonnet while she went on speaking. Lady Markham's hair, though always covered with a cap, was as brown and smooth as her daughter's. Frances put her hand upon it timidly, and smoothed the satin braid. It was all she could do to show the emotion, the sympathy in her heart; and she was as much startled in mind as physically, when Lady Markham suddenly threw one arm round her and rested her head upon her shoulder. 'Thank God,' the mother cried, 'that here is one, whatever may happen, that will never, never——! Frances, my love, don't mind what I say. I am worn out, and good for nothing. Go and get me a little wine, for I have no strength left in me.'

Markham turned to her with his chuckle more marked than ever, as Frances left the room. 'I am glad to see that you have strength to remember what you're about, mammy, in spite of that little break-down. It wouldn't do, would it?—to let Frances believe that a match like Winterbourn was a thing she would never—never——! though it wasn't amiss for poor Nelly, in *her* day.'

'Markham, you are very hard upon me. The child did not understand either one thing or the other. And I was not to blame about Nelly: you cannot say I was to blame. If I had been, I think to-night might make up: that ghastly face, and Nelly's close to it, with her eyes staring in horror, the poor little mouth——'

Markham's exclamation was short and sharp like a pistol-shot. It was a monosyllable, but not one to be put into print. 'Stop that!' he said. 'It can do no good going over it. Who's with her now?'

'I could not stay, Markham; besides it would have been out of place. She has her maid, who is very kind to her; and I made them give her a sleeping-draught—to make her forget her trouble. Sarah Winterbourn laughed out when I asked for it. The doctor was shocked. It was so natural that poor little Nelly, who never saw anything so ghastly, never was in the house with death; never saw, much less touched——'

'I can understand Sarah,' he said, with a grim smile.

Frances came back with the wine, and her mother paused to kiss her as she took it from her hand. 'I am sure you have had a wearing, miserable evening. You look quite pale, my dear. I ought not to speak of such horrid things before you at your age. But you see, Markham, she saw Nelly, and heard her wild talk. It was all excitement and misery and overstrain; for in reality she had nothing to reproach herself with—nothing, Frances. He proved that by sending for her, as I tell you. He knew, and everybody knows, that poor Nelly had done her duty by him.'

Frances paid little attention to this strange defence. She was, as her mother knew, yet could scarcely believe, totally incapable of comprehending the grounds on which Nelly was so strongly asserted to have done her duty, or of understanding that not to have wronged her husband in one unpardonable way gave her a claim upon the applause of her fellows. Fortunately, indeed, Frances was defended against all questions on this subject by the possession of that unsuspected trouble of her own, of which she felt that for the night at least it was futile to say anything. Nelly was the only subject upon which her mother could speak, or for which Markham had any ears. They did not say anything, either after Frances left them or in her presence, of the future, of which, no doubt, their minds were full—of which Nelly's mind had been so full when she burst into Lady Markham's room in her finery, on that very day; of what was to happen after, what 'the widow'—that name against which she so rebelled, but which was already fixed upon her in all the clubs and drawing-rooms—was to do? that was a question which was not openly put to each other by the two persons chiefly concerned.

When Markham appeared in his usual haunts that night, he was aware of being regarded with many significant looks; but these he was of course prepared for, and met with a countenance in which it would have puzzled the wisest to find any special expression.

Lady Markham went to bed as soon as her son left her. She had said she could receive no one, being much fatigued. 'My lady have been with Mrs. Winterbourn,' was the answer made to Sir Thomas when he came to the door late, after a tedious debate in the House of Commons. Sir Thomas, like everybody, was full of speculations on this point, though he regarded it from a point of view different from the popular one. The world was occupied with the question whether Nelly would marry Markham, now that she was rich and free. But what occupied Sir Thomas, who had no doubt on this subject, was the—afterwards? What would Lady Markham do? Was it not now at last the moment for Waring to come home?

In Lady Markham's mind, some similar thoughts were afloat. She had said that she was fatigued; but fatigue does not mean sleep, at least not at Lady Markham's age. It means retirement, silence, and leisure for the far more fatiguing exertion of thought. When her maid had been dismissed, and the faint night-lamp was all that was left in her curtained, cushioned, luxurious room, the questions that arose in her mind were manifold. Markham's marriage would make a wonderful difference in his mother's life. Her house in Eaton Square she would no doubt retain; but the lovely little house in the Isle of Wight—which had been always hers—and the solemn establishment in the country, would be hers no more. These two things of themselves would make a great difference. But what was of still more consequence was, that Markham himself would be hers no more. He would belong to his wife. It was impossible to believe of him that he could ever be otherwise than affectionate and kind; but what a difference when Markham was no longer one of the household! And then the husband, so long cut off, so far separated, much by distance, more by the severance of all the habits and mutual claims which bind people together—with him what would follow? What would be the effect of the change? Questions like these, diversified by perpetual efforts of imagination to bring before her again the tragical scene of which she had been a witness, —the dying man, with his hoarse attempts to be intelligible; the young, haggard, horrified countenance of Nelly, compelled to approach the awful figure, for which she had a child's dread, —kept her awake long into the night. It is seldom that a woman of her age sees herself on the eve of such changes without any will of hers. It seemed to have overwhelmed her in a moment, although, indeed, she had foreseen the catastrophe. What would Nelly do? was the question all the world was asking. But Lady Markham had another which occupied her as much on her own side. Waring, what would he do?

## CHAPTER XLII

THE question which disturbed Frances, which nobody knew or cared for, was just as little likely to gain attention next day as it had been on the evening of Mr. Winterbourn's death.

Lady Markham returned to Nelly before breakfast; she was with her most of the day; and Markham, though he lent an apparent attention to what Frances said to him, was still far too much absorbed in his own subject to be easily moved by hers. 'Gaunt? Oh, he is all right,' he said.

'Will you speak to him, Markham? Will you warn him? Mr. Ramsay says he is losing all his money; and I know, oh Markham, I *know* that he has not much to lose.'

'Claude is a little meddler. I assure you, Fan, Gaunt knows his own affairs best.'

'No,' cried Frances: 'when I tell you, Markham, when I tell you! that they are quite poor, *really* poor—not like you.'

'I have told you, my little dear, that I am the poorest beggar in London.'

'Oh Markham! and you drive about in hansoms, and smoke cigars all day.'

'Well, my dear, what would you have me do? Keep on trudging through the mud, which would waste all my time; or get on the knife-board of an omnibus? Well, these are the only alternatives. The omnibuses have their recommendation—they are fun; but after a while, society in that development palls upon the intelligent observer. What do you want me to do, Fan? Come, I have a deal on my mind; but to please you, and to make you hold your tongue, if there is anything I can do, I will try.'

'You can do everything, Markham. Warn him that he is wasting his money—that he is spending what belongs to the old people—that he is making himself wretched. Oh, don't laugh, Markham! Oh, if I were in your place! I know what I should do—I would get him to go home, instead of going to—those places.'

'Which places, Fan?'

'Oh,' cried the girl, exasperated to tears, 'how can I tell?—the places you know—the places you have taken him to, Markham—places where, if the poor General knew it, or Mrs. Gaunt——'

'There you are making a mistake, little Fan. The good people would think their son was in very fine company. If he tells them the names of the persons he meets, they will think——'

'Then you know they will think wrong, Markham!' she cried, almost with violence, keeping herself with a most strenuous effort from an outburst of indignant weeping. He did not reply at once; and she thought he was about to consider the question on its merits, and endeavour to find out what he could do. But she was undeceived when he spoke.

'What day did you say, Fan, the funeral was to be?' he asked, with the air of a man who has escaped from an unwelcome intrusion to the real subject of his thoughts.

Sir Thomas found her alone, flushed and miserable, drying her tears with a feverish little angry hand. She was very much alone during these days, when Lady Markham was so often with Nelly Winterbourn. Sir Thomas was pleased to find her, having also an object of his own. He soothed her, when he saw that she had been crying. 'Never mind me,' he said; 'but you must not let other people see that you are feeling it so much: for you cannot be supposed to take any particular interest in Winterbourn: and people will immediately suppose that you and your mother are troubled about the changes that must take place in the house.'

'I was not thinking at all of Mrs. Winterbourn,' cried Frances, with indignation.

'No, my dear; I knew you could not be. Don't let any one but me see you crying. Lady Markham will feel the marriage dreadfully, I know. But now is our time for our grand *coup*.'

'What grand *coup*?' the girl said, with an astonished look.

'Have you forgotten what I said to you at the Priory? One of the chief objects of my life is to bring Waring back. It is intolerable to think that a man of his abilities should be banished for ever, and lost not only to his country but his kind. Even if he were working for the good of the race out there—— But he is doing nothing but antiquities, so far as I can hear, and there are plenty of antiquarians good for nothing else. Frances, we must have him home.'

'Home!' she said. Her heart went back with a bound to the rooms in the Palazzo with all the green *persiani* shut, and everything dark and cool: it was getting warm in London, but there were no such precautions taken. And the loggia at night, with the palm-trees waving majestically their long drooping fans, and the soft sound of the sea coming over the houses of the Marina—ah, and the happy want of thought, the pleasant vacancy, in which nothing ever happened! She drew a long breath. 'I ought not to say so, perhaps; but when you say home——'

'You think of the place where you were brought up? That is quite natural. But it would not be the same to him. He was not brought up there; he can have nothing to interest him there. Depend upon it, he must very often wish that he could pocket his pride and come back. We must try to get him back, Frances. Don't you think, my dear, that we could manage it, you and I?'

Frances shook her head, and said she did not know. 'But I should be very glad,—oh, very glad: if I am to stay here,' she said.

'Of course you would be glad; and of course you are to stay here. You could not leave your poor mother by herself. And now that Markham—now that probably everything will be changed for Markham—— If Markham were out of the way, it would be so much easier; for, you know, he always was the stumbling-block. She would not let Waring manage him, and she could not manage him herself.'

Frances was so far instructed in what was going on around her, that she knew how important in Markham's history the death of Mr. Winterbourn had been; but it was not a subject on which she could speak. She said: 'I am very sorry papa did not like Markham. It does not seem possible not to like Markham. But I suppose gentlemen—— Oh, Sir Thomas, if he were here, I would ask papa to do something for me; but now I don't know who to ask to help me—if anything can be done.'

'Is it something I can do?'

'I think,' she said, 'any one that was kind could do it; but only not a girl. Girls are good for so little. Do you remember Captain Gaunt, who came to town a few weeks ago? Sir Thomas, I have heard that something has happened to Captain Gaunt. I don't know how to tell you. Perhaps you will think that it is not my business; but don't you think it is your friend's business, when you get into trouble? Don't you think that—that people who know you—who care a little for you—should always be ready to help?'

'That is a hard question to put to me. In the abstract, yes; but in particular cases—— Is it Captain Gaunt for whom you care a little?'

Frances hesitated a moment, and then she answered boldly: 'Yes—at least I care for his people a great deal. And he has come home from India, not very strong; and he knew nothing about—about what you call Society; no more than I did. And now I hear that he is—I don't know how to tell you, Sir Thomas—losing all his money (and he has not any money) in the places where Markham goes—in the places that Markham took him to. Oh, wait till I have told you everything, Sir Thomas! they are not rich people,—not like any of you here. Markham says he is poor——'

'So he is, Frances.'

'Ah,' she cried, with hasty contempt, 'but you don't understand! He may not have much money; but they—they live in a little house with two maids and Toni. They have no luxuries or grandeur. When they take a drive in old Luca's carriage, it is something to think about. All that is quite, quite different from you people here. Don't you see, Sir Thomas, don't you see? And Captain Gaunt has been—oh, I don't know how it is—losing his money; and he has not got any—and he is miserable—and I cannot get any one to take an interest, to tell him—to warn him, to get him to give up——'

'Did he tell you all this himself?' said Sir Thomas, gravely.

'Oh no, not a word. It was Mr. Ramsay who told me; and when I begged him to say something, to warn him——'

'He could not do that. There he was quite right; and you were quite wrong, if you will let me say so. It is too common a case, alas! I don't know what any one can do.'

'Oh, Sir Thomas! if you will think of the old General and his mother, who love him more than all the rest—for he is the youngest. Oh, won't you do something, try something, to save him?' Frances clasped her hands, as if in prayer. She raised her eyes to his face with such an eloquence of entreaty, that his heart was touched. Not only was her whole soul in the petition for the sake of him who was in peril, but it was full of boundless confidence and trust in the man to whom she appealed. The other plea might have failed; but this last can scarcely fail to affect the mind of any individual to whom it is addressed.

Sir Thomas put his hand on her shoulder with fatherly tenderness. 'My dear little girl,' he said, 'what do you think I can do? I don't know what I can do. I am afraid I should only make things worse, were I to interfere.'

'No, no. He is not like that. He would know you were a friend. He would be thankful. And oh, how thankful, how thankful I should be!'

'Frances, do you take, then, so great an interest in this young man? Do you want me to look after him for your sake?'

She looked at him hastily with an eager 'Yes'—then paused a little, and looked again with a dawning understanding which brought the colour to her cheek. 'You mean something more than I mean,' she said, a little troubled. 'But yet, if you will be kind to George Gaunt, and try to help him, for my sake—— Yes, oh, yes! Why should I refuse? I would not have asked you if I had not thought that perhaps you would do it—for me.'

'I would do a great deal for you; for your mother's daughter, much; and for poor Waring's child; and again, for yourself. But, Frances, a young man who is so weak, who falls into temptation in this way—my dear, you must let me say it—he is not a mate for such as you.'

'For me? Oh no. No one thought—no one ever thought ——' cried Frances hastily. 'Sir Thomas, I hear mamma coming, and I do not want to trouble her, for she has so much to think of? Will you? Oh, promise me. Look for him to-night; oh, look for him to-night!'

'You are so sure that I can be of use?' The trust in her eyes was so genuine, so enthusiastic, that he could not resist that flattery. 'Yes, I will try. I will see what it is possible to do. And you, Frances, remember you are pledged, too; you are to do everything you can for me.'

He was patting her on the shoulder, looking down upon her with very friendly tender eyes, when Lady Markham came in. She was a little startled by the group; but though she was tired and discomposed and out of heart, she was not so preoccupied but what her quick mind caught a new suggestion from it. Sir Thomas was very rich. He had been devoted to herself, in all honour and kindness, for many years. What if Frances——? A whole train of new ideas burst into her mind on the moment, although she had thought, as she came in, that in the present chaos and hurry of her spirits she had room for nothing more.

'You look,' she said with a smile, 'as if you were settling something. What is it? An alliance, a league?'

'Offensive and defensive,' said Sir Thomas. 'We have given each other mutual commissions, and we are great friends, as you see. But these are our little secrets, which we don't mean to tell. How is Nelly, Lady Markham? And is it all right about the will?'

'The will is the least of my cares. I could not inquire into that, as you may suppose; nor is there any need, so far as I know. Nelly is quite enough to have on one's hands, without thinking of the will. She is very nervous and very headstrong. She would have rushed away out of the house, if I had not used—almost force. She cannot bear to be under the same roof with death.'

'It was the old way. I scarcely wonder, for my part; for it was never pretended, I suppose, that there was any love in the matter.'

'Oh no' (Lady Markham looked at her own elderly knight and at her young daughter, and said to herself, What if Frances——?); 'there was no love. But she has always been very good, and done her duty by him—that, everybody will say.'

'Poor Nelly!—that is quite true. But still I should not like, if I were such a fool as to marry a young wife, to have her do her duty to me in that way.'

'You would be very different,' said Lady Markham with a smile. 'I should not think you a fool at all; and I should think her a lucky woman.' She said this with Nelly Winterbourn's voice still ringing in her ears.

'Happily, I am not going to put it to the test. Now, I must go—to look after your affairs, Miss Frances; and remember that you are pledged to look after mine in return.'

Lady Markham looked after him very curiously as he went away. She thought, as women so often think, that men were very strange, inscrutable—'mostly fools,' at least in one way. To think that perhaps little Frances—— It would be a great match, greater than Claude Ramsay—as good in one point of view, and in other respects far better than Nelly St. John's great marriage with the rich Mr. Winterbourn. 'I am glad you like him so much, Frances,' she said. 'He is not young—but he has every other quality; as good as ever man was, and so considerate and kind. You may take him into your confidence fully.' She waited a moment to see if the child had anything to say; then, too wise to force or precipitate matters, went on: 'Poor Nelly gives me great anxiety, Frances. I wish the funeral were over, and all well. Her nerves are in such an excited state, one can't feel sure what she may do or say. The servants and people happily think it grief; but to see Sarah Winterbourn looking at her fills me with fright, I can't tell why. *She* doesn't think it is grief. And how should it be? A dreadful, cold, always ill, repulsive man. But I hope she may be kept quiet, not to make a scandal until after the funeral at least. I don't know what she said to you, my love, that day; but you must not pay any attention to what a woman says in such an excited state. Her marriage has been unfortunate (which is a thing that may happen in any circumstances), not because Mr. Winterbourn was such a good match, but because he was such a disagreeable man.'

Frances, who had no clue to her mother's thoughts, or to any appropriateness in this short speech, had little interest in it. She said, somewhat stiffly, that she was sorry for poor Mrs. Winterbourn—but much more sorry for her own mother, who was having so much trouble and anxiety. Lady Markham smiled upon her, and kissed her tenderly. It was a relief to her mind, in the midst of all those anxious questions, to have a new channel for her thoughts; and upon this new path she threw herself forth in the fulness of a lively imagination, leaving fact far behind, and even probability. She was indeed quite conscious of this, and voluntarily permitted herself the pleasant exercise of building a new castle in the air. Little Frances! And she said to herself there would be no drawback in such a case. It would be the finest match of the season; and no mother need fear to trust her daughter in Sir Thomas's hands.

Sir Thomas came back next morning when Lady Markham was again absent. He informed Frances that he had gone to several places where he was told Captain Gaunt was likely to be found, and had seen Markham as usual 'frittering himself away;' but Gaunt had nowhere been visible. 'Some one said he had fallen ill. If that is so, it is the best thing that could happen. One has some hope of getting hold of him so.' But where did he live? That was the question. Markham did not know, nor any one about. That was the first thing to be discovered, Sir Thomas said. For the first time, Frances appreciated her mother's business-like arrangements for her great correspondence, which made an address-book so necessary. She found Gaunt's address there; and passed the rest of the day in anxiety, which she could confide to no one, learning for the first time those tortures of suspense which to so many women form a great part of existence. Frances thought the day would never end. It was so much the more dreadful to her that she had to shut it all up in her own bosom, and endeavour to enter into other anxieties, and sympathise with her mother's continual panic as to what Nelly Winterbourn might do. The house altogether was in a state of suppressed excitement; even the servants—or perhaps the servants most keenly of any, with their quick curiosity and curious divination of any change in the atmosphere of a family—feeling the thrill of approaching revolution. Frances with her private preoccupation was blunted to this; but when Sir Thomas arrived in the evening, it was all she could do to curb herself and keep within the limits of ordinary rule. She sprang up, indeed, when she heard his step on the stair, and went off to the further corner of the room, where she could read his face out of the dimness before he spoke; and where, perhaps, he might seek her, and tell her, under some pretence. These movements were keenly noted by her mother, as was also the alert air of Sir Thomas, and his interest and activity, though he looked very grave. But Frances did not require to wait for the news she looked for so anxiously.

'Yes, I am very serious,' Sir Thomas said, in answer to Lady Markham's question. 'I have news to tell you which will shock you. Your poor young friend Gaunt—Captain Gaunt—wasn't he a friend of yours?—is lying dangerously ill of fever in a poor little set of lodgings he has got. He is far too ill to know me or say anything to me; but so far as I can make out, it has something to do with losses at play.'

Lady Markham turned pale with alarm and horror. 'Oh, I have always been afraid of this! I had a presentiment,' she cried. Then rallying a little: 'But, Sir Thomas, no one thinks now that fever is brought on by mental causes. It must be bad water or defective drainage.'

'It may be—anything; I can't tell; I am no doctor. But the fact is, the young fellow is lying delirious, raving. I heard him myself—about stakes and chances and losses, and how he will make it up to-morrow. There are other things too. He seems to have had hard lines, poor fellow, if all is true.'

Frances had rushed forward, unable to restrain herself. 'Oh, his mother, his mother—we must send for his mother,' she cried.

'I will go and see him to-morrow,' said Lady Markham. 'I had a presentiment. He has been on my mind ever since I saw him first. I blame myself for losing sight of him. But to-morrow——'

'To-morrow—to-morrow; that is what the poor fellow says.'

## CHAPTER XLIII

LADY MARKHAM did not forget her promise. Whatever else a great lady may forget in these days, her sick people, her hospitals, she is sure never to forget. She went early to the lodgings, which were not far off, hidden in one of the quaint corners of little old lanes behind Piccadilly, where poor Gaunt was. She did not object to the desire of Frances to go with her, nor to the anxiety she showed. The man was ill; he had become a 'case;' it was natural and right that he should be an object of interest. For herself, so far as Lady Markham's thoughts were free at all, George Gaunt was much more than a case to her. A little while ago, she would have given him a large share in her thoughts, with a remorseful consciousness almost of a personal part in the injury which had been done him.

But now there were so many other matters in the foreground of her mind, that this, though it gave her one sharp twinge, and an additional desire to do all that could be done for him, had yet fallen into the background. Besides, things had arrived at a climax: there was no longer any means of delivering him, no further anxiety about his daily movements; there he lay, incapable of further action. It was miserable, yet it was a relief. Markham and Markham's associates had no more power over a sick man.

Lady Markham managed her affairs always in a business-like way. She sent to inquire what was the usual hour of the doctor's visit, and timed her arrival so as to meet him, and receive all the information he could give. Even the medical details of the case were not beyond Lady Markham's comprehension. She had a brief but very full consultation with the medical man in the little parlour downstairs, and promptly issued her orders for nurses and all that could possibly be wanted for the patient. Two nurses at once—one for the day, and the other for the night; ice by the cart-load; the street to be covered with hay; any traffic that it was possible to stop, arrested. These directions Frances heard while she sat anxious and trembling in the brougham, and watched the doctor—a humble and undistinguished practitioner of the neighbourhood, stirred into excited interest by the sudden appearance of the great lady, with her liberal ideas, upon the scene—hurrying away. Lady Markham then disappeared again into the house,—the small, trim, shallow, London lodging-house, with a few scrubby plants in its little balconies on the first floor, where the windows were open, but veiled by sun-blinds. Something that sounded like incessant talking came from these windows—a sound to which Frances paid no attention at first, thinking it nothing but a conversation, though curiously carried on without break or pause. But after a while the monotony of the sound gave her a painful sensation. The street was very quiet, even without the hay. Now and then a cart or carriage would come round the corner, taking a short cut from one known locality to another. Sometimes a street cry would echo through the sunshine. A cart full of flowering-plants, with a hoarse-voiced proprietor, went along in stages, stopping here and there; but through all ran the strain of talk, monologue or conversation, never interrupted. The sound affected the girl's nerves, she could not tell why. She opened the door of the brougham at last, and went into the narrow little doorway of the house, where it became more distinct,—a persistent dull strain of speech. All was deserted on the lower floor, the door of the sitting-room standing open, the narrow staircase leading to the sick man's rooms above. Frances felt her interest, her eager curiosity, grow at every moment. She ran lightly, quickly upstairs. The door of the front room, the room with the balconies, was ajar; and now it became evident that the sound was that of a single voice, hoarse, not always articulate, talking. Oh, the weary strain of talk, monotonous, unending—sometimes rising faintly, sometimes falling lower, never done, without a pause. That could not be raving, Frances said to herself. Oh, not raving! Cries of excitement and passion would have been comprehensible. But there was something more awful in the persistency of the dull choked voice. She said to herself it was not George Gaunt's voice: she did not know what it was. But as she put forth all these arguments to herself, trembling, she drew ever nearer and nearer to the door.

'Red—red—and red. Stick to my colour: my colour—my coat, Markham, and the ribbon, her ribbon. I say red. Play, play—all play—always: amusement: her ribbon, red. No, no; not red, black, colour death—no colour: means nothing, all nothing. Markham, play. Gain or lose—all—all: nothing kept back. Red, I say; and red—blood—blood colour. Mother, mother! no, it's black, black. No blood—no blood—no reproach. Death—makes up all—death. Black—red—black—all death colours, all death, death.' Then there was a little change in the voice. 'Constance?—India; no, no; not India. Anywhere—give up everything. Amusement, did you say amusement? Don't say so, don't say so. Sport to you—but death, death:—colour of death, black: or red—blood: all death colours, death. Mother! don't put on black—red ribbons like hers—red, heart's blood. No bullet, no—her little hand, little white hand—and then blood-red. Constance! Play—play—nothing left—play.'

Frances stood outside and shuddered. Was this, then, what they called raving? She shrank within herself; her heart failed her; a sickness which took the light from her eyes, made her limbs tremble and her head swim. Oh, what sport had he been to the two—the two who were nearest to her in the world! What had they done with him, Mrs. Gaunt's boy—the youngest, the favourite? There swept through the girl's mind like a bitter wind a cry against—Fate was it, or Providence? Had they but let alone, had each stayed in her own place, it would have been Frances who should have met, with a fresh heart, the young man's early fancy. They would have met sincere and faithful, and loved each other, and all would have been well. But there was no Frances; there was only Constance, to throw his heart away. She seemed to see it all as in a picture—Constance with the red ribbons on her gray dress, with the smile that said it was only amusement; with the little hand, the little white hand, that gave the blow. And then all play, all play, red or black, what did it matter? and the bullet; and the mother in mourning, and Markham. Constance and Markham! murderers. This was the cry that came from the bottom of the girl's heart. Murderers!—of two; of him and of herself; of the happiness that was justly hers, which at this moment she claimed, and wildly asserted her right to have, in the clamour of her angry heart. She seemed to see it all in a moment: how he was hers; how she had given her heart to him before she ever saw him; how she could have made him happy. She would not have shrunk from India or anywhere. She would have made him happy. And Constance, for a jest, had come between; for amusement, had broken his heart. And Markham, for amusement—for amusement!—had destroyed his life; and hers as well. There are moments when the gentle and simple mind becomes more terrible than any fury. She saw it all as in a picture—with one clear sudden revelation. And her heart rose against it with a sensation of wrong which was intolerable—of misery, which she could not, would not bear.

She pushed open the door, scarcely knowing what she did. The bed was pulled out from the wall, almost into the centre of the room; and behind, while this strange husky monologue of confused passion was going on unnoted, Lady Markham and the landlady stood together talking in calm undertones of the treatment to be employed. Frances' senses, all stimulated to the highest point, took in, without meaning to do so, every particular of the scene and every word that was said.

'I can do no good by staying now,' Lady Markham was saying. 'There is so little to be done at this stage. The ice to his head, that is all till the nurse comes. She will be here before one o'clock. And in the meantime, you must watch him carefully, and if anything occurs, let me know. Be very careful to tell me everything; for the slightest symptom is important.'

'Yes, my lady; I'll take great care, my lady.' The woman was overawed, yet excited, by this unexpected visitor, who had turned the dull drama of the lodger's illness into a great, important, and exciting conflict, conducted by the highest officials, against disease and death.

'As I go home, I shall call at Dr. ——'s'—naming the great doctor of the moment—'who will meet the other gentleman here; and after that, if they decide on ice-baths or any other active treatment—— But there will be time to think of that. In the meantime, if anything important occurs, communicate with me at once, at Eaton Square.'

'Yes, my lady; I'll not forget nothing. My 'usband will run in a moment to let your ladyship know.'

'That will be quite right. Keep him in the house, so that he may get anything that is wanted.' Lady Markham gave her orders with the liberality of a woman who had never known any limit to the possibilities of command in this way. She went up to the bed and looked at the patient, who lay all unconscious of inspection, continuing the hoarse talk, to which she had ceased to attend, through which she had carried on her conversation in complete calm. She touched his forehead for a moment with the back of her ungloved hand, and shook her head. 'The temperature is very high,' she said. There was a semi-professional calm in all she did. Now that he was under treatment, he could be considered dispassionately as a 'case.' When she turned round and saw Frances within the door, she held up her finger. 'Look at him, if you wish, for a moment, poor fellow; but not a word,' she said. Frances, from the passion of anguish and wrong which had seized upon her, sank altogether into a confused hush of semi-remorseful feeling. Her mother at least was occupied with nothing that was not for his good.

'I told you that I mistrusted Markham,' she said, as they drove away. 'He did not mean any harm. But that is his life. And I think I told you that I was afraid Constance—— Oh, my dear, a mother has a great many hard offices to undertake in her life—to make up for things which her children may have done—*en gaieté du cœur*, without thought.'

'*Gaieté du cœur*—is that what you call it,' cried Frances, 'when you murder a man?' Her voice was choked with the passion that filled her.

'Frances! Murder! You are the last one in the world from whom I should have expected anything violent.'

'Oh!' cried the girl, flushed and wild, her eyes gleaming through an angry dew of pain, 'what word is there that is violent enough? He was happy and good, and there were—there might have been—people who could have loved him, and—and made him happy. When one comes in, one who had no business there, one who—and takes him from—the others, and makes a sport of him and a toy to amuse herself, and flings him broken away. It is worse than murder—if there is anything worse than murder,' she cried.

Lady Markham could not have been more astonished if some passer-by had presented a pistol at her head. 'Frances!' she cried, and took the girl's hot hands into her own, endeavouring to soothe her; 'you speak as if she meant to do it—as if she had some interest in doing it. Frances, you must be just!'

'If I were just—if I had the power to be just—is there any punishment which could be great enough? His life? But it is more than his life. It is misery and torture and wretchedness, to him first, and then to—to his mother—to——' She ended as a woman, as a poor little girl, scarcely yet woman grown, must—in an agony of tears.

All that a tender mother and that a kind woman could do—with due regard to the important business in her hands, and a glance aside to see that the coachman did not mistake Sir Joseph's much-frequented door—Lady Markham did to quench this extraordinary passion, and bring back calm to Frances. She succeeded so far, that the girl, hurriedly drying her tears, retiring with shame and confusion into herself, recovered sufficient self-command to refrain from further betrayal of her feelings. In the midst of it all, though she was not unmoved by her mother's tenderness, she had a kind of fierce perception of Lady Markham's anxiety about Sir Joseph's door, and her eagerness not to lose any time in conveying her message to him, which she did rapidly in her own person, putting the footman aside, corrupting somehow by sweet words and looks the incorruptible functionary who guarded the great doctor's door. It was all for poor Gaunt's sake, and done with care for him, as anxious and urgent as if he had been her own son; and yet it was business too, which, had Frances been in a mood to see the humour of it, might have lighted the tension of her feelings. But she was in no mind for humour—a thing which passion has never any eyes for or cognisance of 'That is all quite right. He will meet the other doctor this afternoon; and we may be now comfortable that he is in the best hands,' Lady Markham said, with a sigh of satisfaction. She added: 'I suppose, of course, his parents will not hesitate about the expense?' in a faintly inquiring tone; but did not insist on any reply. Nor could Frances have given any reply. But amid the chaos of her mind, there came a consciousness of poor Mrs. Gaunt's dismay, could she have known. She would have watched her son night and day; and there was not one of the little community at Bordighera—Mrs. Durant, with all her little pretences; Tasie, with her airs of young-ladyhood—who would not have shared the vigil. But the two expensive nurses, with every accessory that new-fangled science could think of—this would have frightened out of their senses the two poor parents, who would not 'hesitate about the expense,' or any expense that involved their son's life. In this point, too, the different classes could not understand each other. The idea flew through the girl's mind with a half-despairing consciousness that this, too, had something to do with the overwhelming revolution in her own circumstances. A man of her own species would have understood Constance; he would have known Markham's reputation and ways. The pot of iron and the pot of clay could not travel together without damage to the weakest. This went vaguely through Frances' mind in the middle of her excitement, and perhaps helped to calm her. It also stilled, if it did not calm her, to see that her mother was a little afraid of her in her new development.

Lady Markham, when she returned to the brougham after her visit to Sir Joseph, manifestly avoided the subject. She was careful not to say anything of Markham or of Constance. Her manner was anxious, deprecatory, full of conciliation. She advised Frances, with much tenderness, to go and rest a little when they got home. 'I fear you have been doing too much, my darling,' she cried, and followed her to her room with some potion in a glass.

'I am quite well,' Frances said; 'there is nothing the matter with me.'

'But I am sure, my dearest, that you are overdone.' Her anxious and conciliatory looks were of themselves a tonic to Frances, and brought her back to herself.

Markham, when he appeared in the evening, showed unusual feeling too. He was at the crisis, it seemed, of his own life, and perhaps other sentiments had therefore an easier hold upon him. He came in looking very downcast, with none of his usual banter in him. 'Yes, I know. I have heard all about it, bless you. What else, do you think, are those fellows talking about? Poor beggar. Who ever thought he'd have gone down like that in so short a time? Now, mother, the only thing wanting is that you should say "I told you so." And Fan,—no, Fan can do worse; she can tell me that she thought he was safe in my hands.'

'It is not my way to say I told you so, Markham; but yet——'

'You could do it, mammy, if you tried—that is well known. I'm rather glad he is ill, poor beggar; it stops the business. But there are things to pay, that is the worst.'

'Surely, if it is to a gentleman, he will forgive him,' cried Frances, 'when he knows——'

'Forgive him! Poor Gaunt would rather die. It would be as much as a man's life was worth to offer to—forgive another man. But how should the child know? That's the beauty of Society and the rules of honour, Fan. You can forgive a man many things, but not a shilling you've won from him. And how is he to mend, good life! with the thought of having to pay up in the end?' Markham repeated this despondent speech several times before he went gloomily away. 'I had rather die straight off, and make no fuss. But even then, he'd have to pay up, or somebody for him. If I had known what I know now, I'd have eaten him sooner than have taken him among those fellows, who have no mercy.'

'Markham, if you would listen to me, you would give them up—you too.'

'Oh, I——' he said, with his short laugh. 'They can't do much harm to me.'

'But you must change—in that as well as other things, if——'

'Ah, if,' he said, with a curious grimace; and took up his hat and went away.

Thus, Frances said to herself, his momentary penitence and her mother's pity melted away in consideration of themselves. They could not say a dozen words on any other subject, even such an urgent one as this, before their attention dropped, and they relapsed into the former question about themselves. And such a question!—Markham's marriage, which depended upon Nelly Winterbourn's widowhood and the portion her rich husband left her. Markham was an English peer, the head of a family which had been known for centuries, which even had touched the history of England here and there; yet this was the ignoble way in which he was to take the most individual step of a man's life. Her heart was full almost to bursting of these questions, which had been gradually awakening in her mind. Lady Markham, when left alone, turned always to the consolation of her correspondence—of those letters to write which filled up all the interstices of her other occupations. Perhaps she was specially glad to take refuge in this assumed duty, having no desire to enter again with her daughter into any discussion of the events of the day. Frances withdrew into a distant corner. She took a book with her, and did her best to read it, feeling that anything was better than to allow herself to think, to summon up again the sound of that hoarse broken voice running on in the feverish current of disturbed thought. Was he still talking, talking, God help him! of death and blood and the two colours, and her ribbon, and the misery which was all play? Oh, the misery, causeless, unnecessary, to no good purpose, that had come merely from this—that Constance had put herself in Frances' place,—that the pot of iron had thrust itself in the road of the pot of clay. But she must not think—she must not think, the girl said to herself with feverish earnestness, and tried the book again. Finding it of no avail, however, she put it down, and left her corner and came, in a moment of leisure between two letters, behind her mother's chair. 'May I ask you a question, mamma?'

'As many as you please, my dear;' but Lady Markham's face bore a harassed look. 'You know, Frances, there are some to which there is no answer—which I can only ask with an aching heart, like yourself,' she said.

'This is a very simple one. It is, Have I any money—of my own?'

Lady Markham turned round on her chair and looked at her daughter. 'Money!' she said. 'Are you in need of anything? Do you want money, Frances? I shall never forgive myself, if you have felt yourself neglected.'

'It is not that. I mean—have I anything of my own?'

After a little pause. 'There is a—small provision made for you by my marriage settlement,' Lady Markham said.

'And—once more—could, oh, could I have it, mamma?'

'My dear child! you must be out of your senses. How could you have it at your age—unless you were going to marry?'

This suggestion Frances rejected with the contempt it merited. 'I shall never marry,' she said; 'and there never could be a time when it would be of so much importance to me to have it as now. Oh, tell me, is there no way by which I could have it now?'

'Sir Thomas is one of our trustees. Ask him. I do not think he will let you have it, Frances. But perhaps you could tell him what you want, if you will not have confidence in me. Money is just the thing that is least easy for me. I could give you almost anything else; but money I have not. What can you want money for, a girl like you?'

Frances hesitated before she replied. 'I would rather not tell you,' she said; 'for very likely you would not approve; but it is nothing—wrong.'

'You are very honest, my dear. I do not suppose for a moment it is anything wrong. Ask Sir Thomas,' Lady Markham said, with a smile. The smile had meaning in it, which to Frances was incomprehensible. 'Sir Thomas—will refuse nothing he can in reason give—of that I am sure.'

Sir Thomas, when he came in shortly afterwards, said that he would not disturb Lady Markham. 'For I see you are busy, and I have something to say to Frances.'

'Who has also something to say to you,' Lady Markham said, with a benignant smile. Her heart gave a throb of satisfaction. It was all she could do to restrain herself, not to tell the dear friend to whom she was writing that there was every prospect of a *most happy* establishment for dear Frances. And her joy was quite genuine and almost innocent, notwithstanding all she knew.

'You have written to your father?' Sir Thomas said. 'My dear Frances, I have got the most [illegible] from him, the first I have had for years. He asks me [illegible] know what state Hilborough is in—if it is habitable? That looks like coming home, don't you think? And it is years since he has written to me before.'

Frances did not know what Hilborough was; but she disliked showing her ignorance. And this idea was not so comforting to her as Sir Thomas expected. She said: 'I do not think he will come,' with downcast eyes.

But Sir Thomas was strong in his own way of thinking. He was excited and pleased by the letter. He told her again and again how he had desired this—how happy it made him to think he was about to be successful at last. 'And just at the moment when all is likely to be arranged—when Markham—— You have brought me luck, Frances. Now, tell me what it was you wanted from me?'

Frances' spirits had fallen lower and lower while his rose. Her mind ranged over the new possibilities with something like despair. It would be Constance, not she, who would have done it, if he came back—Constance who had taken her place from her—the love that ought to have been hers—her father—and who now, on her return, would resume her place with her mother too. Ah, what would Constance do? Would she do anything for him who lay yonder in the fever, for his father and his mother, poor old people!—anything to make up for the harm she had done? Her heart burned in her agitated, troubled bosom. 'It is nothing,' she said—'nothing that you would do for me. I had a great wish—but I know you would not let me do it, neither you nor my mother.'

'Tell me what it is, and we shall see.'

Frances felt her voice die away in her throat. 'We went this morning to see—to see——'

'You mean poor Gaunt. It is a sad sight, and a sad story—too sad for a young creature like you to be mixed up in. Is it anything for him, that you want me to do?'

She looked at him through those hot gathering tears which interrupt the vision of women, and blind them when they most desire to see clearly. A sense of the folly of her hope, of the impossibility of making any one understand what was in her mind, overwhelmed her. 'I cannot, I cannot,' she cried. 'Oh, [illegible] are very kind. I wanted my own money, if I have any. But I know you will not give it me, nor think it right, nor understand what I want to do with it.'

'Have you so little trust in me?' said Sir Thomas. 'I hope, if you told me, I could understand. I cannot give you your own money, Frances; but if it were for a good—no, I will not say that—for a sensible, for a practicable purpose, you should have some of mine.'

'Yours!' she cried, almost with indignation. 'Oh no; that is not what I mean. They are nothing—nothing to you.' She paused when she had said this, and grew very pale. 'I did not mean—— Sir Thomas, please do not say anything to mamma.'

He took her hand affectionately between his own. 'I do not half understand,' he said; 'but I will keep your secret, so far as I know it, my poor little girl.'

Lady Markham at her writing-table, with her back turned, went on with her correspondence all the time in high satisfaction and pleasure, saying to herself that it would be far better than Nelly Winterbourn's—that it would be the finest match of the year.

## CHAPTER XLIV

It had seemed to Frances, as it appears naturally to all who have little experience, that a man who was so ill as Captain Gaunt must get better or get worse without any of the lingering suspense which accompanies a less violent complaint; but, naturally, Lady Markham was wiser, and entertained no such delusions. When it had gone on for a week, it already seemed to Frances as if he had been ill for a year,—as if there never had been any subject of interest in the world but the lingering course of the malady, which waxed from less to more, from days of quiet to hours of active delirium. The business-like nurses, always so cool and calm, with their professional reports, gave the foolish girl a chill to her heart, thinking, as she did, of the anxiety that would have filled, not the house alone in which he lay, but all the little community, had he been ill at home. Perhaps it was better for him that he was not ill at home,—that the changes in his state were watched by clear eyes, not made dim by tears or oversharp by anxiety, but which took him very calmly, as a case interesting, no doubt, but only in a scientific sense.

After a few days, Lady Markham herself wrote to his mother a very kind letter, full of detail, describing everything which she had done, and how she had taken Captain Gaunt entirely into her own hands. 'I thought it better not to lose any time,' she said; 'and you may assure yourself that everything has been done for him that could have been done, had you yourself been here. I have acted exactly as I should have done for my own son in the circumstances;' and she proceeded to explain the treatment, in a manner which was far too full of knowledge for poor Mrs. Gaunt's understanding, who could scarcely read the letter for tears. The best nurses, the best doctor, the most anxious care, Lady Markham's own personal supervision, so that nothing should be neglected. The two old parents held their little counsel over this letter with full hearts. It had been Mrs. Gaunt's first intention to start at once, to get to her boy as fast as express trains could carry her; but then they began to look at each other, to falter forth broken words about expense. Two nurses, the best doctor in London—and then the mother's rapid journey, the old General left alone. How was she to do it, so anxious, so unaccustomed as she was? They decided, with many doubts and terrors, with great self-denial, and many a sick flutter of questionings as to which was best, to remain. Lady Markham had promised them news every day of their boy, and a telegram at once if there was 'any change'—those awful words, that slay the very soul. Even the poor mother decided that in these circumstances it would be 'self-indulgence' to go; and from henceforward, the old people lived upon the post-hours, —lived in awful anticipation of a telegram announcing a 'change.' Frances was their daily correspondent. She had gone to look at him, she always said, though the nurses would not permit her to stay. He was no worse. But till another week, there could be no change. Then she would write that the critical day had passed—that there was still no change, and would not be again for a week; but that he was no worse. No worse!—this was the poor fare upon which General Gaunt and his wife lived in their little Swiss *pension*, where it was so cheap. They gave up even their additional candle, and economised that poor little bit of expenditure; they gave up their wine; they made none of the little excursions which had been their delight. Even with all these economies, how were they to provide the expenses which were running on—the dear London lodgings, the nurses, the boundless outgoings, which it was understood they would not grudge? Grudge! No; not all the money in the world, if it could save their George. But where—where were they to get this money? Whence was it to come.

This Frances knew, but no one else. And she, too, knew that the lodgings and the nurses and the doctors were so far from being all. The poor girl spent the days much as they did, in agonised questions and considerations. If she could but get her money, her own money, whatever it was. Later, for her own use, what would it matter? She could work, she could take care of children, it did not matter what she did: but to save him, to save them. She had learned so much, however, about life and the world in which she lived, as to know that, were her object known, it would be treated as the supremest folly. Wild ideas of Jews, of finding somebody who would lend her what she wanted, as young men do in novels, rose in her mind, and were dismissed, and returned again. But she was not a young man; she was only a girl, and knew not what to do, nor where to go. Not even the very alphabet of such knowledge was hers.

While this was going on, she was taken, all abstracted as she was, into Society—to the solemn heavinesses of dinner-parties; to dances even, in which her gravity and self-absorption were construed to mean very different things. Lady Markham had never said a word to any one of the idea which had sprung into her own mind full grown at sight of Sir Thomas holding in fatherly kindness her little girl's hands. She had never said a word, oh, not a word. How such a wild and extraordinary rumour had got about, she could not imagine. But the ways of Society and its modes of information are inscrutable: a glance, a smile, are enough. And what so natural as this to bring a veil of gravity over even a *débutante* in her first season? Lucky little girl, some people said; poor little thing, some others. No wonder she was so serious; and her mother, that successful general—her mother, that triumphant match-maker, radiant, in spite, people said, of the very uncomfortable state of affairs about Markham, and the fact that, in the absence of the executor, Nelly Winterbourn knew nothing as yet as to how she was 'left.'

Thus the weeks went past in great suspense for all. Markham had recovered, it need scarcely be said, from his fit of remorse; and he, perhaps, was the one to whom these uncertainties were a relief rather than an oppression. Mrs. Winterbourn had retired into the country, to wait the arrival of the all-important functionary who had possession of her husband's will, and to pass decorously the first profundity of her mourning. Naturally, Society knew everything about Nelly: how, under the infliction of Sarah Winterbourn's society, she was quite as well as could be expected; how she was behaving herself beautifully in her retirement, seeing nobody, doing just what it was right to do. Nelly had always managed to retain the approval of Society, whatever she did. In the best circles, it was now a subject of indignant remark that Sarah Winterbourn should take it upon herself to keep watch like a dragon over the widow. For Nelly's prevision was right, and the widow was what the men now called her, though women are not addicted to that form of nomenclature. But Sarah Winterbourn was universally condemned. Now that the poor girl had completed her time of bondage, and conducted herself so perfectly, why could not that dragon leave her alone? Markham made no remark upon the subject; but his mother, who understood him so well, believed he was glad that Sarah Winterbourn should be there, making all visits unseemly. Lady Markham thought he was glad of the pause altogether, of the impossibility of doing anything; and to be allowed to go on without any disturbance in his usual way. She had herself made one visit to Nelly, and reported, when she came home, that notwithstanding the presence of Sarah, Nelly's natural brightness was beginning to appear, and that soon she would be as *espiègle* as ever. That was Lady Markham's view of the subject; and there was no doubt that she spoke with perfect knowledge.

It was very surprising, accordingly, to the ladies, when, some days after this, Lady Markham's butler came up-stairs to say that Mrs. Winterbourn was at the door, and had sent to inquire whether his mistress was at home and alone before coming up-stairs. 'Of course I am at home,' said Lady Markham; 'I am always at home to Mrs. Winterbourn. But to no one else, remember, while she is here.' When the man went away with his message, Lady Markham had a moment of hesitation. 'You may stay,' she said to Frances, 'as you were present before and saw her in her trouble. But I wonder what has brought her to town? She did not intend to come to town till the end of the season. She must have something to tell me. O Nelly, how are you, dear?' she cried, going forward and taking the young widow into her arms. Nelly was in crape from top to toe. As she had always done what was right, what people expected from her, she continued to do so till the end. A little rim of white was under the edge of her close black bonnet with its long veil. Her cuffs were white and hem-stitched in the old-fashioned *deep* way. Nothing, in short, could be more *deep* than Nelly's costume altogether. She was a very pattern for widows; and it was very becoming, as that dress seldom fails to be. It would have been natural to expect in Nelly's countenance some consciousness of this, as well as perhaps a something at the corners of her mouth which should show that, as Lady Markham said, she would soon be as *espiègle* as ever. But there was nothing of this in her face. She seemed to have stiffened with her crape. She suffered Lady Markham's embrace rather than returned it. She did not take any notice of Frances. She walked across the room, sweeping with her long dress, with her long veil like an ensign of woe, and sat down with her back to the light. But for a minute or more she said nothing, and listened to Lady Markham's questions without even a movement in reply.

'What is the matter, my dear? Is it something you have to tell me, or have you only got tired of the country?' Lady Markham said, with a look of alarm beginning to appear in her face.

'I am tired of the country,' said Mrs. Winterbourn; 'but I am also tired of everything else, so that does not matter much. Lady Markham, I have come to tell you a great piece of news. My trustee and Mr. Winterbourn's executor, who has been at the other end of the world, has come home.'

'Yes, Nelly?' Lady Markham's look of alarm grew more and more marked. 'You make me very anxious,' she cried. 'I am sure something has happened that you did not foresee.'

'Oh, nothing has happened—that I ought not to have foreseen. I always wondered why Sarah Winterbourn stuck to me so. The will has been opened and read, and I know how it all is now. I rushed to tell you, as you have been so kind.'

'Dear Nelly!' Lady Markham said, not knowing, in the growing perturbation of her mind, what else to say.

'Mr. Winterbourn has been very liberal to me. He has left me everything he can leave away from his heir-at-law. Nothing that is entailed, of course; but there is not very much under the entail. They tell me I will be one of the richest women—a wealthy widow.'

'My dear Nelly, I am so very glad; but I am not surprised. Mr. Winterbourn had a great sense of justice. He could not do less for you than that.'

'But Lady Markham, you have not heard all.' It was not like Nelly Winterbourn to speak in such measured tones.

There was not the faintest sign of the *espiègle* in her voice. Frances, roused by the astonished, alarmed look in her mother's face, drew a little nearer almost involuntarily, notwithstanding her abstraction in anxieties of her own.

'Nelly, do you mind Frances being here?'

'Oh, I wish her to be here! It will do her good. If she is going to do—the same as I did, she ought to know.' She made a pause again—Lady Markham meanwhile growing pale with fright and panic, though she did not know what there could be to fear.

'There are some people who had begun to think that I was not so well "left" as was expected,' she said; 'but they were mistaken. I am very well "left." I am to have the house in Grosvenor Square, and the Knoll, and all the plate and carriages, and three parts or so of Mr. Winterbourn's fortune—so long as I remain Mr. Winterbourn's widow. He was, as you say, a just man.'

There was a pause. But for something in the air which tingled after Nelly's voice had ceased, the listeners would scarcely have been conscious that anything more than ordinary had been said. Lady Markham said 'Nelly?' in a breathless interrogative tone—alarmed by that thrill in the air, rather than by the words, which were so simple in their sound.

'Oh yes; he had a great sense of justice. So long as I remain Mrs. Winterbourn, I am to have all that. It was his, and I was his, and the property is to be kept together. Don't you see, Lady Markham?—Sarah knew it, and I might have known, had I thought. He had a great respect for the name of Winterbourn—not much, perhaps, for anything else.' She paused a little, then added: 'That's all. I wished you to know.'

'Oh my dear,' cried Lady Markham, 'is it possible—is it possible? You—debarred from marrying, debarred from everything—at your age!'

'Oh, I can do anything I please,' cried Nelly. 'I can go to the bad if I please. He does not say so long as I behave myself—only so long as I remain the widow Winterbourn. I told you they would all call me so. Well, they can do it! That's what I am to be all my life—the widow Winterbourn.'

'Nelly—O Nelly,' cried Lady Markham, throwing her arms round her visitor. 'Oh, my poor child! And how can I tell —how am I to tell——?'

'You can tell everybody, if you please,' said Mrs. Winterbourn, freeing herself from the clasping arms and rising up in her stiff crape. 'He had a great sense of justice. He doesn't say I'm to wear weeds all my life. I think I mean to come back to Grosvenor Square on Monday, and perhaps give a ball or two, and some dinners, to celebrate—for I have come into my fortune, don't you see?' she said, with an unmoved face.

'Hush, dear—hush! You must not talk like that,' Lady Markham said, holding her arm.

'Why not! Justice is justice, whether for him or me. I was such a fool as to be wretched when he was dying, because—— But it appears that there was no love lost—no love and no faith lost. He did not believe in me, any more than I believed in him. I outwitted him when he was living, and he outwits me when he is dead. Do you hear, Frances? —that is how things go. If you do as I did, as I hear you are going to do—— Oh, do it if you please; I will never interfere. But make up your mind to this—he will have his revenge on you—or justice; it is all the same thing. Good-bye, Lady Markham. I hope you will countenance me at my first ball—for now I have come into my fortune, I mean to enjoy myself. Don't you think these things are rather becoming? I mean to wear them out. They will make a sensation at my parties,' she said, and for the first time laughed aloud.

'This is just the first wounded feeling,' said Lady Markham. 'O Nelly, you must not fly in the face of Society. You have always been so good. No, no; let us think it over. Perhaps we can find a way out of it. There is bound to be a flaw somewhere.'

'Good-bye,' said Nelly. 'I have not fixed on the day for my first At Home; but the invitations will be out directly. Good-bye, Frances. You must come—and Sir Thomas. It will be a fine lesson for Sir Thomas.' She walked across the room to the door, and there stood for a moment, looking back. She looked taller, almost grand in still fury and despair with her immovable face. But as she stood there, a faint softening came to the marble. 'Tell Geoff—gently,' she said, and went away. They could hear the soft sweep of her black robes retiring down the stair, and then the door opening, the clang of the carriage.

Lady Markham had dropped into a chair in her dismay, and sat with her hands clasped and her eyes wide open, listening to these sounds, as if they might throw some light on the situation. The consequences which might follow from Nelly's freedom had been heavy on her heart; and it was possible that by and by this strange news might bring the usual comfort; but, in the meantime, consternation overwhelmed her. 'As long as she remains his widow!' she said to herself in a tone of horror, as the tension of her nerves yielded and the carriage drove away. 'And how am I to tell him—gently; how am I to tell him gently?' she cried. It was as if a great catastrophe had overwhelmed the house.

In an hour or so, however, Lady Markham recovered her energy, and began to think whether there might be any way out of it. 'I'll tell you,' she cried suddenly; 'there is your uncle Clarendon, Frances. He is a great lawyer. If any man can find a flaw in the will, he will do it.' She rang the bell at once, and ordered the carriage. 'But, oh dear,' she said, 'I forgot. Lady Meliora is coming about Trotter's Buildings, the place in Whitechapel. I cannot go. Whatever may happen, I cannot go to-day. But, my dear, you have never taken any part as yet; you need not stay for this meeting: and besides, you are a favourite in Portland Place; you are the best person to go. You can tell your uncle Clarendon—— Stop; I will write a note,' Lady Markham cried. That was always the most satisfactory plan in every case. She sent her daughter to get ready to go out; and she herself dashed off in two minutes four sheets of the clearest statement, a *précis* of the whole case. Mr. Clarendon, like most people, liked Lady Markham,—he did not share his wife's prejudices; and Frances was a favourite. Surely, moved by these two influences combined, he would bestir himself and find a flaw in the will!

In less than half an hour from the time of Mrs. Winterbourn's departure, Frances found herself alone in the brougham, going towards Portland Place. Her mind was not absorbed in Nelly Winterbourn. She was not old enough, or sufficiently used to the ways of Society, to appreciate the tragedy in this case. Nelly's horror at the moment of her husband's death she had understood; but Nelly's tragic solemnity now struck her as with a jarring note. Indeed, Frances had never learned to think of money as she ought. And yet, how anxious she was about money! How her thoughts returned, as soon as she felt herself alone and free to pursue them, to the question which devoured her heart. It was a relief to her to be thus free, thus alone and silent, that she might think of it. If she could but have driven on and on for a hundred miles or so, to think of it, to find a solution for her problem! But even a single mile was something; for before she had got through the long line of Piccadilly, a sudden inspiration came to her mind. The one person in the world whom she could ask for help was the person whom she was on her way to see—her aunt Clarendon, who was rich, with whom she was a favourite; who was on the other side, ready to sympathise with all that belonged to the life of Bordighera, in opposition to Eaton Square. Nelly Winterbourn and her troubles fled like shadows from Frances' mind. To be truly disinterested, to be always mindful of other people's interests, it is well to have as few as possible of one's own.

Mrs. Clarendon received her, as always, with a sort of combative tenderness, as if in competition for her favour with some powerful adversary unseen. There was in her a constant readiness to outbid that adversary, to offer more than she did, of which Frances was usually uncomfortably conscious, but which to-day stimulated her like a cordial. 'I suppose you are being taken to all sorts of places?' she said. 'I wish I had not given up Society so much; but when the season is over, and the fine people are all in the country, then you will see that we have not forgotten you. Has Sir Thomas come with you, Frances? I supposed, perhaps, you had come to tell me——'

'Sir Thomas?' Frances said, with much surprise; but she was too much occupied with concerns more interesting to ask what her aunt could mean. 'Oh, aunt Caroline,' she said, 'I have come to speak to you of something I am very, very much interested about.' In all sincerity, she had forgotten the original scope of her mission, and only remembered her own anxiety. And then she told her story—how Captain Gaunt, the son of her old friend, the youngest, the one that was best beloved, had come to town—how he had made friends who were not—nice—who made him play and lose money—though he had no money.

'Of course, my dear, I know—Lord Markham and his set.'

At this Frances coloured high. 'It was not Markham. Markham has found out for me. It was some—fellows who had no mercy, he said.'

'Oh yes; they are all the same set. I am very sorry that an innocent girl like you should be in any way mixed up with such people. Whether Lord Markham plucks the pigeon himself, or gets some of his friends to do it——'

'Aunt Caroline, now you take away my last hope; for Markham is my brother; and I will never, never ask any one to help me who speaks so of my brother—he is always so kind, so kind to me.'

'I don't see what opportunity he has ever had to be kind to you,' said Mrs. Clarendon.

But Frances in her disappointment would not listen. She turned away her head, to get rid, so far as was possible, of the blinding tears—those tears which would come in spite of her, notwithstanding all the efforts she could make. 'I had a little hope in you,' Frances said; 'but now I have none, none. My mother sees him every day; if he lives, she will have saved his life. But I cannot ask her for what I want. I cannot ask her for more—she has done so much. And now, you make it impossible for me to ask you!'

If Frances had studied how to move her aunt best, she could not have hit upon a more effectual way. 'My dear child,' cried Mrs. Clarendon, hurrying to her, drawing her into her arms, 'what is it, what is it that moves you so much? Of whom are you speaking? His life? Whose life is in danger? And what is it you want? If you think I, your father's only sister, will do less for you than Lady Markham does——! Tell me, my dear, tell me what is it you want?'

Then Frances continued her story. How young Gaunt was ill of a brain-fever, and raved about his losses, and the black and red, and of his mother in mourning (with an additional ache in her heart, Frances suppressed all mention of Constance), and how *she* understood, though nobody else did, that the Gaunts were not rich, that even the illness itself would tax all their resources, and that the money, the debts to pay, would ruin them, and break their hearts. 'I don't say he has not been wrong, aunt Caroline—oh, I suppose he has been very wrong!—but there he is lying: and oh, how pitiful it is to hear him! and the old General, who was so proud of him; and Mrs. Gaunt, dear Mrs. Gaunt, who always was so good to me!'

'Frances, my child, I am not a hard-hearted woman, though you seem to think so,—I can understand all that. I am very, very sorry for the poor mother; and for the young man even, who has been led astray: but I don't see what you can do.'

'What!' cried Frances, her eyes flashing through her tears—'for their son, who is the same as a brother—for them, whom I have always known, who have helped to bring me up? Oh, you don't know how people live where there are only a few of them,—where there is no society, if you say that. If he had been ill there, at home, we should all have nursed him, every one. We should have thought of nothing else. We would have cooked for him, or gone errands, or done anything. Perhaps those ladies are better who go to the hospitals. But to tell me that you don't know what I could do! Oh,' cried the girl, springing to her feet, throwing up her hands, 'if I had the money, if I had only the money, I know what I would do!'

Mrs. Clarendon was a woman who did not spend money, who had everything she wanted, who thought little of what wealth could procure; but she was a Quixote in her heart, as so many women are where great things are in question, though not in small. 'Money?' she said, with a faint quiver of alarm in her voice. 'My dear, if it was anything that was feasible, anything that was right, and you wanted it very much—the money might be found,' she said. The position, however, was too strange to be mastered in a moment, and difficulties rose as she spoke. 'A young man. People might suppose—— And then Sir Thomas—what would Sir Thomas think?'

'That is why I came to you; for he will not give me my own money—if I have any money. Aunt Caroline, if you will give it me now, I will pay you back as soon as I am of age. Oh, I don't want to take it from you—I want—— If everything could be paid before he is better, before he knows—if we could hide it, so that the General and his mother should never find out. That would be worst of all, if they were to find out—it would break their hearts. Oh, aunt Caroline, she thinks there is no one like him. She loves him so; more than—more than any one here loves anybody: and to find out all that would break her heart.'

Mrs. Clarendon rose at this moment, and stood up with her face turned towards the door. 'I can't tell what is the matter with me,' she said; 'I can scarcely hear what you are saying. I wonder if I am going to be ill, or what it is. I thought just then I heard a voice. Surely there is some one at the door. I am sure I heard a voice—— Oh, a voice you ought to know, if it was true. Frances—I will think of all that after—just now—— He must be dead, or else he is here!'

Frances, who thought of no possibility of death save to one, caught her aunt's arm with a cry. The great house was very still—soft carpets everywhere—the distant sound of a closing door scarcely penetrating from below. Yet there was something, that faint human stir which is more subtle than sound. They stood and waited, the elder woman penetrated by sudden excitement and alarm, she could not tell why; the girl indifferent, yet ready for any wonder in the susceptibility of her anxious state. As they stood, not knowing what they expected, the door opened slowly, and there suddenly stood in the opening, like two people in a dream—Constance, smiling, drawing after her a taller figure. Frances, with a start of amazement, threw from her her aunt's arm, which she held, and calling 'Father!' flung herself into Waring's arms.

## CHAPTER XLV

'I FOUND him in the mood; so I thought it best to strike while the iron was hot,' Constance said. She had settled down languidly in a favourite corner, as if she had never been away. She had looked for the footstool where she knew it was to be found, and arranged the cushion as she liked it. Frances had never made herself so much at home as Constance did at once. She looked on with calm amusement while her aunt poured out her delight, her wonder, her satisfaction, in Waring's ears. She did not budge herself from her comfortable place;

but she said to Frances in an undertone: 'Don't let her go on too long. She will bore him, you know; and then he will repent. And I don't want him to repent.'

As for Frances, she saw the ground cut away entirely from under her feet, and stood sick and giddy after the first pleasure of seeing her father was over, feeling her hopes all tumble about her. Mrs. Clarendon, who had been so near yielding, so much disposed to give her the help she wanted, had forgotten her petition and her altogether in the unexpected delight of seeing her brother. And here was Constance, the sight of whom perhaps might call the sick man out of his fever, who might restore life and everything, even happiness to him, if she would. But would she? Frances asked herself. Most likely, she would do nothing, and there would be no longer any room left for Frances, who was ready to do all. She would have been more than mortal if she had not looked with a certain bitterness at this new and wonderful aspect of affairs.

'I saw mamma's brougham at the door,' Constance said; 'you must take me home. Of course, this was the place for papa to come; but I must go home. It would never do to let mamma think me devoid of feeling. How is she, and Markham—and everybody? I have scarcely had any news for three months. We met Algy Muncastle on the boat, and he told us some things—a great deal about Nelly Winterbourn—the widow, as they call her—and about you.'

'There could be nothing to say of me.'

'Oh, but there was, though. What a sly little thing you are, never to say a word! Sir Thomas.—Ah, you see I know. And I congratulate you with all my heart, Fan. He is rolling in money, and such a good kind old man. Why, he was a lover of mamma's *dans les temps.* It is delightful to think of you consoling him. And you will be as rich as a little princess, with mamma to see that all the settlements are right.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Frances said abruptly. She was so preoccupied and so impatient, that she would not even allow herself to inquire. She went to where her father sat talking to his sister, and stood behind his chair, putting her hand upon his arm. He did not perhaps care for her very much. He had aunt Caroline to think of, from whom he had been separated so long; and Constance, no doubt, had made him her own too, as she had made everybody else her own; but still he was all that Frances had, the nearest, the one that belonged to her most. To touch him like this gave her a little consolation. And he turned round and smiled at her, and put his hand upon hers. That was a little comfort too; but it did not last long. It was time she should return to her mother; and Constance was anxious to go, notwithstanding her fear that her father might be bored. 'I must go and see my mother, you know, papa. It would be very disrespectful not to go. And you won't want me, now you have got aunt Caroline. Frances is going to drive me home.' She said this as if it was her sister's desire to go; but as a matter of fact, she had taken the command at once. Frances, reluctant beyond measure to return to the house, in which she felt she would no longer be wanted—which was a perverse imagination, born of her unhappiness—wretched to lose the prospect of help, which she had been beginning to let herself believe in, was yet too shy and too miserable to make any resistance. She remembered her mother's note for Mr. Clarendon before she went away, and she made one last appeal to her aunt. 'You will not forget what we were talking about, aunt Caroline?'

'Dear me,' said Mrs. Clarendon, putting up her hand to her head. 'What was it, Frances? I have such a poor memory; and your father's coming, and all this unexpected happiness, have driven everything else away.'

Frances went down-stairs with a heart so heavy that it seemed to lie dead in her breast. Was there no help for her, then? no help for *him*, the victim of Constance and of Markham? no way of softening calamity to the old people? Her temper rose as her hopes fell. All so rich, so abounding, but no one who would spare anything out of his superfluity, to help the ruined and heartbroken. Oh yes, she said to herself in not unnatural bitterness, the hospitals, yes; and Trotter's Buildings in Whitechapel. But for the people to whom they were bound so much more closely, the man who had sat at their tables, whom they had received and made miserable, nothing! oh, nothing! not a finger held out to save him. The little countenance that had been like a summer day, so innocent and fresh and candid, was clouded over. Pride prevented—pride, more effectual than any other defence—the outburst which in other circumstances would have relieved her heart. She sat in her corner, withdrawn as far as possible from Constance, listening dully, making little response. After several questions, her sister turned upon her with a surprise which was natural too.

'What is the matter?' she said. 'You don't talk as you used to do. Is it town that has spoiled you? Do you think I will interfere with you? Oh, you need not be at all afraid. I have enough of my own without meddling with you.'

'I don't know what I have that you could interfere with,' said Frances. 'Nothing here.'

'Do you want to quarrel with me?' Constance said.

'It is of no use to quarrel; there is nothing to quarrel about. I might have thought you would interfere when you came first to Bordighera. I had people then who seemed to belong to me. But here—you have the first place. Why should I quarrel? You are only coming back to your own.'

'Fan, for goodness' sake, don't speak in that dreadful tone. What have I done? If you think papa likes me best, you are mistaken. And as for the mother, don't you know her yet? Don't you know that she is nice to everybody, and cares neither for you nor me?'

'No,' cried Frances, raising herself bolt upright; 'I don't know that! How dare you say it, you who are her child? Perhaps you think no one cares—not one, though you have made an end of my home. Did you hear about George Gaunt, what you have done to him? He is lying in a brain-fever, raving, raving, talking for ever, day and night; and if he dies, Markham and you will have killed him—you and Markham; but you have been the worst. It will be murder, and you should be killed for it!' the girl cried. Her eyes blazed upon her sister in the close enclosure of the little brougham. 'You thought he did not care, either, perhaps.'

'Fan! Good heavens! I think you must be going out of your senses,' Constance cried.

Frances was not able to say any more. She was stifled by the commotion of her feelings, her heart beating so wildly in her breast, her emotion reaching the intolerable. The brougham stopped, and she sprang out and ran into the house, hurrying up-stairs to her own room. Constance, more surprised and disconcerted than she could have believed possible, nevertheless came in with an air of great composure, saying a word in passing to the astonished servant at the door. She was quite amiable always to the people about her. She walked up-stairs, remarking, as she passed, a pair of new vases with palms in them, which decorated the staircase, and which she approved. She opened the drawing-room door in her pretty, languid-stately, always leisurely way.

'How are you, mamma? Frances has run up-stairs; but here am I, just come back,' she said.

Lady Markham rose from her seat with a little scream of astonishment. 'CONSTANCE! It is not possible. Who would have dreamed of seeing you!' she cried.

'Oh yes, it is quite possible,' said Constance, when they had kissed, with a prolonged encounter of lips and cheeks. 'Surely, you did not think I could keep very long away?'

'My darling, did you get home-sick, or mammy-sick as Markham says, after all your philosophy?'

'I am so glad to see you, mamma, and looking so well. No, not home-sick, precisely, dear mother, but penetrated with the folly of staying *there*, where nothing was ever doing, when I might have been in the centre of everything: which is saying much the same thing, though in different words.'

'In very different words,' said Lady Markham, resuming her seat with a smile. 'I see you have not changed at all, Con. Will you have any tea? And did you leave—your home there—with as little ceremony as you left me!'

'May I help myself, mamma? don't you trouble. It is very nice to see your pretty china, instead of Frances' old bizarre cups, which were much too good for me. Oh, I did not leave my—home. I—brought it back with me.'

'You brought——?'

'My father with me, mamma.'

'Oh!' Lady Markham said. She was too much astonished to say more.

'Perhaps it was because he got very tired of me, and thought there was no other way of getting rid of me; perhaps because he was tired of it himself. He came at last like a lamb. I did not really believe it till we were on the boat, and

Algy Muncastle turned up, and I introduced him to my father. You should have seen how he stared.'

'Oh!' said Lady Markham again; and then she added faintly: 'Is—is he here?'

'You mean papa? I left him at aunt Caroline's. In the circumstances, that seemed the best thing to do.'

Lady Markham leaned back in her chair; she had become very pale. One shock after another had reduced her strength. She closed her eyes while Constance very comfortably sipped her tea. It was not possible that she could have dreamed it or imagined it, when, on opening her eyes again, she saw Constance sitting by the tea-table with a plate of bread and butter before her. 'I have really,' she explained seriously, 'eaten nothing to-day.'

Frances came down some time after, having bathed her eyes and smoothed her hair. It was always smooth like satin, shining in the light. She came in, in her unobtrusive way, ashamed of herself for her outburst of temper, and determined to be 'good,' whatever might happen. She was surprised that there was no conversation going on. Constance sat in a chair which Frances at once recognised as having been hers from the beginning of time, wondering at her own audacity in having sat in it, when she did not know. Lady Markham was still leaning back in her chair. 'Oh, it's nothing—only a little giddiness. So many strange things are happening. Did you give your uncle Clarendon my note? I suppose Frances told you, Con, how we have been upset to-day?'

'Upset?' said Constance over her bread and butter. 'I should have thought you would have been immensely pleased. It is about Sir Thomas, I suppose?'

'About Sir Thomas! Is there any news about Sir Thomas?' said Lady Markham, with an elaborately innocent look. 'If so, it has not yet been confided to me.' And then she proceeded to tell to her daughter the story of Nelly Winterbourn.

'I should have thought that would all have been set right in the settlements,' Constance said.

'So it ought. But she had no one to see to the settlements—no one with a real interest in her; and it was such a magnificent match.'

'No better than Sir Thomas, mamma.'

'Ah, Sir Thomas. Is there really a story about Sir Thomas? I can only say, if it is so, that he has never confided it to me.'

'I hope no mistake will be made about the settlements in that case. And what do you suppose Markham will do?'

'What can he do? He will do nothing, Con. You know, after all, that is the *rôle* that suits him best. Even if all had been well, unless Nelly had asked him herself——'

'Do you think she would have minded, after all this time? But I suppose there's an end of Nelly now,' Constance said, regretfully.

'I am afraid so,' Lady Markham replied. And then recovering, she began to tell her daughter the news—all the news of this one and the other, which Frances had never been able to understand, which Constance entered into as one to the manner born. They left the subject of Nelly Winterbourn, and not a word was said of young Gaunt and his fever; but apart from these subjects, everything that had happened since Constance left England was discussed between them. They talked and smiled and rippled over into laughter, and passed in review the thousand friends whose little follies and freaks both knew, and skimmed across the surface of tragedies with a consciousness, that gave piquancy to the amusement, of the terrible depths beneath. Frances, keeping behind, not willing to show her troubled countenance, from which the traces of tears were not easily effaced, listened to this light talk with a wonder which almost reached the height of awe. Her mother at least must have many grave matters in her mind; and even on Constance, the consciousness of having stirred up all the quiescent evils in the family history, of her father in England, of the meeting which must take place between the husband and wife so long parted, all by her influence, must have a certain weight. But there they sat and talked and laughed, and shot their little shafts of wit. Frances, at last feeling her heart ache too much for further repression, and that the pleasant interchange between her mother and sister exasperated instead of lightened her burdened soul, left them, and sought refuge in her room, where presently she heard their voices again as they came up-stairs to dress. Constance's boxes had in the meantime arrived from the railway, and the conversation was very animated upon fashions and new adaptations and what to wear. Then the door of Constance's room was closed, and Lady Markham came tapping at that of Frances. She took the girl into her arms. 'Now,' she said, 'my dream is going to be realised, and I shall have my two girls, one on each side of me. My little Frances, are you not glad?'

'Mother——' the girl said, faltering, and stopped, not able to say any more.

Lady Markham kissed her tenderly, and smiled, as if she were content. Was she content? Was the happiness, now she had it, as great as she said? Was she able to be light-hearted with all these complications round her? But to these questions who could give any answer? Presently she went to dress, shutting the door; and, between her two girls, retired so many hundred, so many thousand miles away—who could tell?—into herself.

In the evening there was considerable stir and commotion in the house. Markham, warned by one of his mother's notes, came to dinner full of affectionate pleasure in Con's return, and cheerful inquiries for her. 'As yet, you have lost nothing, Con. As yet, nobody has got well into the swim. As to how the mammy will feel with two daughters to take about, that is a mystery. If we had known, we'd have shut up little Fan in the nursery for a year more.'

'It is I that should be sent to the nursery,' said Constance. 'Three months is a long time. Algy Muncastle thought I was dead and buried. He looked at me as if he were seeing a ghost.'

'A girl might just as well be dead and buried as let half the season slip over and never appear.'

'Unless she were a widow,' said Con.

'Ah! unless she were a widow, as you say. That changes the face of affairs.' Markham made a slight involuntary retreat when he received that blow, but no one mentioned the name of Nelly Winterbourn. It was much too serious to be taken any notice of now. In the brightness of Lady Markham's drawing-room, with all its softened lights, grave subjects were only discussed *tête-à-tête*. When the company was more than two, everything took a sportive turn. Of the two visitors, however, who came in later, one was not at all disposed to follow this rule. Sir Thomas said but little to Constance, though her arrival was part of the news which had brought him here; but he held Lady Markham's hand with an anxious look into her eyes, and, as soon as he could, drew Frances aside to the distant corner in which she was fond of placing herself. 'Do you know he has come?' he cried.

'I have seen papa, Sir Thomas, if that is what you mean.'

'What else could I mean?' said Sir Thomas. 'You know how I have tried for this. What did he say? I want to know what disposition he is in. And what disposition is *she* in? Frances, you and I have a great deal to do. We have the ball at our feet. There is nobody acting in both their interests but you and I.'

There was something in Frances' eyes and in her look of mute endurance which startled him, even in the midst of his enthusiasm. 'What is the matter?' he said. 'I have not forgotten our bargain. I will do much for you, if you will work for me. And you want something. Come, tell me what it is?'

She gave him a look of reproach. Had he, too, forgotten the sick and miserable, the sufferer, of whom no one thought? 'Sir Thomas,' she said, 'Constance has money; she has stopped at Paris to buy dresses. Oh, give me what is my share.'

'I remember now,' he said.

'Then you know the only thing that any one can do for me. Oh, Sir Thomas, if you could but give it me now.'

'Shall I speak to your father?' he asked.

These words Markham heard by chance, as he passed them to fetch something his mother wanted. He returned to where she sat with a curious look in his little twinkling eyes. 'What is Sir Thomas after? Do you know the silly story that is about? They say that old fellow is after Lady Markham's daughter. It had better be put a stop to, mother. I won't have anything go amiss with little Fan.'

'Go amiss! with Sir Thomas. There is nobody he might not marry, Markham—not that anything has ever been said.'

'Let him have anybody he pleases except little Fan. I won't have anything happen to Fan. She is not one that would stand it, like the rest of us. We are old stagers; we are trained for the stake; we know how to grin and bear it. But that little thing, she has never been brought up to it, and it would kill her. I won't have anything go wrong with little Fan.'

'There is nothing going wrong with Frances. You are not talking with your usual sense, Markham. If that was coming, Frances would be a lucky girl.'

Markham looked at her with his eyes all pursed up, nearly disappearing in the puckers round them. 'Mother,' he said, 'we know a girl who was a very lucky girl, you and I. Remember Nelly Winterbourn.'

It gave Lady Markham a shock to hear Nelly's name. 'O Markham, the less we say of her the better,' she cried.

There was another arrival while they talked—Claude Ramsay, with the flower in his coat a little rubbed by the greatcoat which he had taken off in the hall, though it was now June. 'I heard you had come back,' he said, dropping languidly into a chair by Constance. 'I thought I would come and see if it was true.'

'You see it is quite true.'

'Yes; and you are looking as well as possible. Everything seems to agree with you. Do you know I was very nearly going out to that little place in the Riviera? I got all the *renseignements;* but then I heard that it got hot and the people went away.'

'You ought to have come. Don't you know it is at the back of the east wind, and there are no draughts there?'

'What an ideal place!' said Claude. 'I shall certainly go next winter, if you are going to be there.'

## CHAPTER XLVI

FRANCES slept very little all night; her mind was jarred and sore almost at every point. The day with all its strange experiences, and still more strange suggestions, had left her in a giddy round of the unreal, in which there seemed no ground to stand upon. Nelly Winterbourn was the first prodigy in that round of wonders. Why, with that immovable tragic face, had she intimated to Lady Markham the tenure upon which she held her fortune? Why had it been received as something conclusive on all sides? 'There is an end of Nelly.' But why? And then came her mission to her aunt, the impression that had been made on her mind—the hope that had dawned on Frances; and then the event which swept both hope and impression away, and the bitter end that seemed to come to everything in the reappearance of Constance. Was it that she was jealous of Constance? Frances asked herself in the silence of the night, with noiseless bitter tears. The throbbing of her heart was all pain; life had become pain, and nothing more. Was it that she was jealous—*jealous* of her sister? It seemed to Frances that her heart was being wrung, pressed till the life came out of it in great drops under some giant's hands. She said to herself, No, no. It was only that Constance came in her careless grace, and the place was hers, wherever she came; and all Frances had done, or was trying to do, came to nought. Was that jealousy? She lay awake through the long hours of the summer night, seeing the early dawn grow blue, and then warm and lighten into the light of day. And then all the elements of chaos round her, which whirled and whirled and left no honest footing, came to a pause and disappeared, and one thing real, one fact remained —George Gaunt in his fever, lying rapt from all common life, taking no note of night or day. Perhaps the tide might be turning for death or life, for this was once more the day that might be the crisis. The other matters blended into a phantasmagoria, of which Frances could not tell which part was false and which true, or if anything was true; but here was reality beyond dispute. She thought of the pale light stealing into his room, blinding the ineffectual candles; of his weary head on the pillow growing visible; of the long endless watch; and far away among the mountains, of the old people waiting and praying, and wondering what news the morning would bring them. This thought stung Frances into a keen life and energy, and took from her all reflection upon matters so abstract as that question whether or not she was jealous of Constance. What did it matter? so long as he could be brought back from the gates of death and the edge of the grave, so long as the father and mother could be saved from that awful and murderous blow. She got up hastily, long before any one was stirring. There are moments when all our ineffectual thinkings, and even futile efforts, end in a sudden determination that the thing must be done, and revelation of how to do it. She got up with a little tremor upon her, such as a great inventor might have when he saw at last his way clearly, or a poet when he had caught the spark of celestial fire. Is there any machine that was ever invented, or even any power so divine as the right way to save a life and deliver a soul? Frances' little frame was all tingling, but it made her mind clear and firm. She asked herself how she could have thought of any other but this way.

It was very early in the morning when she set out. If it had not been London, in which no dew falls, the paths would have been wet with dew; even in London there was a magical something in the air which breathed of the morning, and which not all the housemaids' brooms and tradesmen's carts in the world could dispel. Frances walked on in the stillness, along the long silent line of the Park, where there was nobody save a little early schoolmistress, or perhaps a belated man about town, surprised by the morning, with red eyes and furtive looks, in the overcoat which hid his evening clothes, hurrying home—to break the breadth of the sunshine, the soft morning light, which was neither too warm nor dazzling, but warmed gently, sweetly to the heart. Her trouble had departed from her in the resolution she had taken. She was very grave, not knowing whether death or life, sorrow or hope, might be in the air, but composed, because, whatever it was, it must now come, all being done that man could do. She did not hasten, but walked slowly, knowing how early she was, how astonished her aunt's servants would be to see her, unattended, walking up to the door. 'I will arise and go to my father.' Wherever these words can be said, there is peace in them, a sense of safety at least. There are, alas! many cases in which, with human fathers, they cannot be said; but Waring, whatever his faults might be, had not forfeited his child's confidence, and he would understand. To all human aches and miseries, to be understood is the one comfort above all others. Those to whom she had appealed before had been sorry; they had been astonished; they had gazed at her with troubled eyes. But her father would understand. This was the chief thing and the best. She went along under the trees, which were still fresh and green, through the scenes which, a little while later, would be astir with all the movements, the comedies, the tragedies, the confusions and complications of life. But now they lay like a part of the fair silent country, like the paths in a wood, like the glades in a park, all silent and mute, birds in the branches, dew upon the grass—a place where Town had abdicated, where Nature reigned.

Waring awoke betimes, being accustomed to the early hours of a primitive people. It was a curious experience to him to come down through a closed-up and silent house, where the sunshine came in between the chinks of the shutters, and all was as it had been in the confusion of the night. A frightened maid-servant came before him to open the study, which his brother-in-law Clarendon had occupied till a late hour. Traces of the lawyer's vigil were still apparent enough—his waste-paper basket full of fragments; the little tray standing in the corner, which, even when holding nothing more than soda-water and claret, suggests dissipation in the morning. Waring was jarred by all this unpreparedness. He thought with a sigh of the bookroom in the Palazzo all open to the sweet morning air, before the sun had come round that way; and when he stepped out upon the little iron balcony attached to the window and looked out upon other backs of houses, all crowding round, the recollection of the blue seas, the waving palms, the great peaks, all carved against the brilliant sky, made him turn back in disgust. The mean London walls of yellow brick, the narrow houses, the little windows, all blinded with white blinds and curtains, so near that he could almost touch them—'However, it will not be like this at Hilborough,' he said to himself. He was no longer in the mood in which he had left Bordighera; but yet, having left it, he was ready to acknowledge that Bordighera was now impossible. His life there had continued from year to year—it might have continued for ever, with Frances ignorant of all that had gone before; but the thread of life once broken, could be knitted again no more. He acknowledged this to himself; and then he found that, in acknowledging it, he had brought himself face to face with all the gravest problems of his life. He had held them at arm's-length for years; but now they had to be decided, and there was no alternative. He must meet them; he must look them in the face. And *her*, too, he must look in the face. Life once more had come to a point at which neither habit nor the past could help him. All over again, as if he were a boy coming of age, it would have to be decided what it should be.

Waring was not at all surprised by the appearance of Frances fresh with the morning air about her. It seemed quite natural to him. He had forgotten all about the London streets, and how far it was from one point to another. He thought she had gained much in her short absence from him,—perhaps in learning how to act for herself, to think for herself, which she had acquired since she left him; for he was entirely unaware, and even quite incapable of being instructed, that Frances had lived her little life as far apart from him, and been as independent of him while sitting by his side at Bordighera, as she could have been at the other end of the world. But he was impressed by the steady light of resolution, the cause of which was as yet unknown to him, which was shining in her eyes. She told him her story at once, without the little explanations that had been necessary to the others. When she said George Gaunt, he knew all that there was to say. The only thing that it was expedient to conceal was Markham's part in the catastrophe, which was, after all, not at all clear to Frances; and as Waring was not acquainted with Markham's reputation, there was no suggestion in his mind of the name that was wanting to explain how the young officer, knowing nobody, had found entrance into the society which had ruined him. Frances told her tale in few words. She was magnanimous, and said nothing of Constance on the one hand, any more than of Markham on the other. She told her father of the condition in which the young man lay—of his constant mutterings, so painful to hear, the Red and Black that came up, over and over again, in his confused thoughts, the distracting burden that awaited him if he ever got free of that circle of confusion and pain—of the old people in Switzerland waiting for the daily news, not coming to him as they wished, because of that one dread yet vulgar difficulty which only she understood. 'Mamma says, of course they would not hesitate at the expense. Oh no, no! they would not hesitate. But how can I make her understand? yet we know.'

'How could she understand?' he said with a pale smile, which Frances knew. '*She* has never hesitated.' It was all that jarred even upon her excited nerves and mind. The situation was so much more clear to him than to the others, to whom young Gaunt was a stranger. And Waring, too, was in his nature something of a Quixote to those who took him on the generous side. He listened—he understood; he remembered all that had been enacted under his eyes. The young fellow had gone to London in desperation, unsettled, and wounded by the woman to whom he had given his love—and he had fallen into the first snare that presented itself. It was weak, it was miserable; but it was not more than a man could understand. When Frances found that at last her object was attained, the unlikeliness that it ever should have been attained overwhelmed her even in the moment of victory. She clasped her arms round her father's arm, and laid down her head upon it, and, to his great surprise, burst into a passion of tears. 'What is the matter? What has happened? Have I said anything to hurt you?' he cried, half touched, half vexed, not knowing what it was, smoothing her glossy hair half tenderly, half reluctantly, with his disengaged hand.

'Oh, it is nothing, nothing! It is my folly; it is—happiness. I have tried to tell them all, and no one would understand. But one's father—one's father is like no one else,' cried Frances, with her cheek upon his sleeve.

Waring was altogether penetrated by these simple words, and by the childish action, which reminded him of the time when the little forlorn child he had carried away with him had no one but him in the world. 'My dear,' he said, 'it makes me happy that you think so. I have been rather a failure, I fear, in most things; but if you think so, I can't have been a failure all round.' His heart grew very soft over his little girl. He was in a new world, though it was the old one. His sister, whom he had not seen for so long, had half disgusted him with her violent partisanship, though his was the party she upheld so strongly. And Constance, who had no hold of habitual union upon him, had exhibited all her faults to his eyes. But his little girl was still his little girl, and believed in her father. It brought a softening of all the ice and snow about his heart.

They walked together through the many streets to inquire for poor Gaunt, and were admitted with shakings of the head and downcast looks. He had passed a very disturbed night, though at present he seemed to sleep. The nurse who had been up all night, and was much depressed, was afraid that there were symptoms of a 'change.' 'I think the parents should be sent for, sir,' she said, addressing herself at once to Waring. These attendants did not mind what they said over the uneasy bed. 'He don't know what we are saying, any more than the bed he lies on. Look at him, miss, and tell me if you don't think there is a change?' Frances held fast by her father's arm. She was more diffident in his presence than she had been before. The sufferer's gaunt face was flushed, his lips moved, though, in his weakness, his words were not audible. The other nurse, who had come to relieve her colleague, and who was fresh and unwearied, was far more hopeful. But she, too, thought that 'a change' might be approaching, and that it would be well to summon the friends. She went down-stairs with them to talk it over a little more. 'It seems to me that he takes more notice than we are aware of,' she said. 'The ways of sick folks are that wonderful, we don't understand, not the half of them; seems to me that you have a kind of an influence, miss. Last night he changed after you were here, and took me for his mamma, and asked me what I meant, and said something about a Miss Una that was true, and a false Jessie or something. I wonder if your name is Miss Una, miss?' This inquiry was made while Waring was writing a telegram to the parents. Frances, who was not very quick, could only wonder for a long time who Una was and Jessie. It was not till evening, nearly twelve hours after, that there suddenly came into her mind the false Duessa of the poet. And then the question remained, who was Una, and who Duessa? a question to which she could find no reply.

Frances remained with her father the greater part of the day. When she found that what she desired was to be done, there fell a strange kind of lull into her being, which unaccountably took away her strength, so that she scarcely felt herself able to hold up her head. She began to be aware that she had neither slept by night nor had any peace by day, and that a fever of the mind had been stealing upon her, a sort of reflection of the other fever, in which her patient was enveloped as in a living shroud. She was scarcely able to stand, and yet she could not rest. Had she not put force upon herself, she would have been sending to and fro all day, creeping thither on limbs that would scarcely support her, to know how he was, or if the change had yet appeared. She had not feared for his life before, having no tradition of death in her mind; but now an alarm grew upon her that any moment might see the blow fall, and that the parents might come in vain. It was while she stood at one of the windows of Mrs. Clarendon's gloomy drawing-room, watching for the return of one of her messengers, that she saw her mother's well-known brougham drive up to the door. She turned round with a little cry of 'Mamma' to where her father was sitting, in one of the seldom-used chairs. Mrs. Clarendon, who would not leave him for many minutes, was hovering by, wearying his fastidious mind with unnecessary solicitude, and a succession of questions which he neither could nor wished to answer. She flung up her arms when she heard Frances' cry. 'Your mother! Oh, has she dared! Edward, go away, and let me meet her. She will not get much out of me.'

'Do you think I am going to fly from my wife?' Waring said. He rose up very tremulous, yet with a certain dignity. 'In that case, I should not have come here.'

'But, Edward, you are not prepared. O Edward, be guided by me. If you once get into that woman's hands——'

'Hush!' he said; 'her daughter is here.' Then, with a smile: 'When a lady comes to see me, I hope I can receive her still as a gentleman should, whoever she may be.'

The door opened, and Lady Markham came in. She was very pale, yet flushed from moment to moment. She, who had usually such perfect self-command, betrayed her agitation by little movements, by the clasping and unclasping of her hands, by a hurried, slightly audible breathing. She stood for a moment without advancing, the door closing behind her, facing the agitated group. Frances, following an instinctive impulse, went hastily towards her mother as a maid of honour in an emergency might hurry to take her place behind the Queen. Mrs. Clarendon, on her side, with a similar impulse, drew nearer to her brother—the way was cleared between the two, once lovers, now antagonists. The pause was but for a moment. Lady Markham, after that hesitation, came forward. She said: 'Edward, I should be wanting in my duty if I did not come to welcome you home.'

'Home!' he said, with a curious smile. Then he, too, came forward a little. 'I accept your advances in the same spirit, Frances.' She was holding out her hands to him with a little appeal, looking at him with eyes that sank and rose again—an emotion that was restrained by her age, by her matronly person, by the dignity of the woman, which could not be quenched by any flood of feeling. He took her hands in his with a strange timidity, hesitating, as if there might be something more, then let them drop, and they stood once again apart.

'I have to thank you, too,' she said, 'for bringing Constance back to me safe and well; and what is more, Edward, for this child.' She put out her hand to Frances, and drew her close, so that the girl could feel the agitation in her mother's whole person, and knew that, weak as she was, she was a support to the other, who was so much stronger. 'I owe you more thanks still for her—that she never had been taught to think any harm of her mother, that she came back to me as innocent and true as she went away.'

'If you found her so, Frances, it was to her own praise, rather than mine.'

'Nay,' she said, with a tremulous smile, 'I have not to learn now that the father of my children was fit to be trusted with a girl's mind—more, perhaps, than their mother—and the world together.' She shook off this subject, which was too germane to the whole matter, with a little tremulous movement of her head and hands. 'We must not enter on that,' she said. 'Though I am only a woman of the world, it might be too much for me. Discussion must be for another time. But we may be friends.'

'So far as I am concerned.'

'And I too, Edward. There are things even we might consult about—without prejudice, as the lawyers say—for the children's good.'

'Whatever you wish my advice upon——'

'Yes, that is perhaps the way to put it,' Lady Markham said, after a pause which looked like disappointment, and with an agitated smile. 'Will you be so friendly, then,' she added, 'as to dine at my house with the girls and me? No one you dislike will be there. Sir Thomas, who is in great excitement about your arrival; and perhaps Claude Ramsay, whom Constance has come back to marry.'

'Then she has settled that?'

'I think so; yet no doubt she would like him to be seen by you. I hope you will come,' she said, looking up at him with a smile.

'It will be very strange,' he said, 'to dine as a guest at your table.'

'Yes, Edward; but everything is strange. We are so much older now than we were. We can afford, perhaps, to disagree, and yet be friends.'

'I will come if it will give you any pleasure,' he said.

'Certainly, it will give me pleasure.' She had been standing all the time, not having even been offered a seat—an omission which neither he nor she had discovered. He did it now, placing with great politeness a chair for her; but she did not sit down.

'For the first time, perhaps it is enough,' she said. 'And Caroline thinks it more than enough. Good-bye, Edward. If you will believe me, I am—truly glad to see you: and I hope we may be friends.'

She half raised her clasped hands again. This time he took them in both his, and leaning towards her, kissed her on the forehead. Frances felt the tremor that ran through her mother's frame. 'Good-bye,' she said, 'till this evening.' Only the girl knew why Lady Markham hurried from the room. She stopped in the hall below to regain her self-command and arrange her bonnet. 'It is so long since we have met,' she said, 'it upsets me. Can you wonder, Frances? The woman in the end always feels it most. And then there are so many things to upset me just now. Constance and Markham—say nothing of Markham; do not mention his name—and even you——'

'There is nothing about me to annoy you, mamma.'

Lady Markham smiled with a face that was near crying.

She gave a little tap with her finger upon Frances' cheek, and then she hurried away.

## CHAPTER XLVII

THE dinner, it need scarcely be said, was a strange one. Except in Constance, who was perfectly cool, and Claude, who was more concerned about a possible draught from a window than anything else, there was much agitation in the rest of the party. Lady Markham was nervously cordial, anxious to talk and to make everything 'go'—which, indeed, she would have done far more effectually had she been able to retain her usual cheerful and benign composure. But there are some things which are scarcely possible even to the most accomplished woman of the world. How to place the guests, even, had been a trouble to her, almost too great to be faced. To place her husband by her side was more than she could bear, and where else could it be appropriate to place him, unless opposite to her, where the master of the house should sit? The difficulty was solved loosely by placing Constance there, and her father beside her. He sat between his daughters; while Ramsay and Sir Thomas were on either side of his wife. Under such circumstances, it was impossible that the conversation could be other than formal, with outbursts of somewhat conventional vivacity from Sir Thomas, supported by anxious responses from Lady Markham. Frances took refuge in saying nothing at all. And Waring sat like a ghost, with a smile on his face, in which there was a sort of pathetic humour, dashed with something that was half derision. To be sitting there at all was wonderful indeed, and to be listening to the small talk of a London dinner-table, with all its little discussions, its talk of plays and pictures and people, its scraps of political life behind the scenes, its esoteric revelations on all subjects, was more wonderful still. He had half forgotten it; and to come thus at a single step into the midst of it all, and hear this babble floating on the air which was charged with so many tragic elements, was more wonderful still. To think that they should all be looking at each other across the flowers and the crystal, and knowing what questions were to be solved between them, yet talking and expecting others to talk of the new tenor and the last scandal! It seemed to the stranger out of the wilds, who had been banished from Society so long, that it was a thing incredible, when he was thus thrown into it again. There were allusions to many things which he did not understand. There was something, for instance, about Nelly Winterbourn which called forth a startling response from Lady Markham. 'You must not,' she said, 'say anything about poor Nelly in this house. From my heart, I am sorry and grieved for her; but in the circumstances, what can any one do? The least said, the better, especially here.' The pause after this was minute but marked, and Waring asked Constance, 'Who is Nelly Winterbourn?'

'She is a young widow, papa. It was thought her husband had left her a large fortune; but he has left it to her on the condition that she should not marry again.'

'Is that why she is not to be spoken of in this house?' said Waring, growing red. This explanation had been asked and given in an undertone. He thought it referred to the circumstances in which his own marriage had taken place—Lady Markham being a young widow with a large jointure; and that this was the reason why the other was not to be mentioned; and it gave him a hot sense of offence, restrained by the politeness which is exercised in Society, but not always when the offenders are one's wife and children. It turned the tide of softened thoughts back upon his heart, and increased to fierceness the derision with which he listened to all the trifles that floated uppermost. When the ladies left the room, he did not meet the questioning, almost timid, look that Lady Markham threw upon him. He saw it, indeed, but he would not respond to it. That allusion had spoiled all the rest.

In the little interval after dinner, Claude Ramsay did his best to make himself agreeable. 'I am very glad to see you back, sir,' he said. 'I told Lady Markham it was the right thing. When a girl has a father, it's always odd that he shouldn't appear.'

'Oh, you told Lady Markham that it was—the right thing?'

'A coincidence, wasn't it? when you were on your way,' said Claude, perceiving the mistake he had made. 'You know, sir,' he added with a little hesitation, 'that it has all been made up for a long time between Constance and me.'

'Yes? What has all been made up? I understand that my daughter came out to me to ——'

'Oh!' said Claude, interrupting hurriedly, 'it is *that* that has all been made up. Constance has been very nice about it,' he continued. 'She has been making a study of the Riviera, and collecting all sorts of *renseignements;* for in most cases, it is necessary for me to winter abroad.'

'That was what she was doing then—her object, I suppose?' said Waring with a grim smile.

'Besides the pleasure of visiting you, sir,' said Claude, with what he felt to be great tact. 'She seems to have done a great deal of exploring, and she tells me she has found just the right site for the villa—and all the *renseignements,*' he added. 'To have been on the spot, and studied the aspect, and how the winds blow, is such a great thing; and to be near your place too,' he said politely, by an afterthought.

'Which I hope is to be your place no more, Waring,' said Sir Thomas. 'Your own place is very empty, and craving for you all the time.'

'It is too fine a question to say what is my own place,' he said, with that pale indignant smile. 'Things are seldom made any clearer by an absence of a dozen years.'

'A greal deal clearer—the mists blow away, and the hot fumes. Come, Waring, say you are glad you have come home.'

'I suppose,' said Claude, 'you find it really too hot for summer on that coast. What would you say was the end of the season? May? Just when London begins to be possible, and most people have come to town.'

'Is not that one of the *renseignements* Constance has given you?' Waring asked with a short laugh; but he made no reply to the other questions. And then there was a little of the inevitable politics before the gentlemen went up-stairs. Lady Markham had been threatened with what in France is called an *attaque des nerfs,* when she reached the shelter of the drawing-room. She was a little hysterical, hardly able to get the better of the sobbing which assailed her. Constance stood apart, and looked on with a little surprise. 'You know, mamma,' she said reflectively, 'an effort is the only thing. With an effort, you can stop it.'

Frances was differently affected by this emotion. She, who had never learned to be familiar, stole behind her mother's chair and made her breast a pillow for Lady Markham's head, —a breast in which the heart was beating now high, now low, with excitement and despondency. She did not say anything; but there is sometimes comfort in a touch. It helped Lady Markham to subdue the unwonted spasm. She held close for a moment the arms which were over her shoulders, and she replied to Constance, 'Yes, that is true. I am ashamed of myself. I ought to know better—at my age.'

'It has gone off on the whole very well,' Constance said. And then she retired to a sofa and took up a book.

Lady Markham held Frances' hand in hers for a moment or two longer, then drew her towards her and kissed her, still without a word. They had approached nearer to each other in that silent encounter than in all that had passed before. Lady Markham's heart was full of many commotions; the past was rising up around her with all its agitating recollections. She looked back, and saw, oh, so clearly in that pale light which can never alter, the scenes that ought never to have been, the words that ought never to have been said, the faults, the mistakes—those things which were fixed there for ever, not to be forgotten. Could they ever be forgotten? Could any postscript be put to the finished story? Or was this strange meeting—unsought, scarcely desired on either side, into which the separated Two, who ought to have been One, seemed to have been driven without any will of their own—was it to be mere useless additional pain, and no more?

The ladies were all very peacefully employed when the gentlemen came up-stairs. Lady Markham turned round as usual from her writing-table to receive them with a smile. Constance laid down her book. Frances, from her accustomed dim corner, lifted up her eyes to watch them as they came in. They stood in the middle of the room for a minute, and talked to each other according to the embarrassed usage of Englishmen, and then they distributed themselves. Sir Thomas fell to Frances' share. He turned to her eagerly, and took her hand and pressed it warmly. 'We have done it,' he said, in an excited whisper. 'So far, all is victorious; but still there is a great deal more to do.'

'I think it is Constance that has done it,' Frances said.

'She has worked for us—without meaning it—no doubt. But I am not going to give up the credit to Constance; and there is still a great deal to do. You must not lay down your arms, my dear. You and I, we have the ball at our feet: but there is a great deal still to do.'

Frances made no reply. The corner which she had chosen for herself was almost concealed behind a screen which parted the room in two. The other group made a picture far enough withdrawn to gain perspective. Waring stood near his wife, who from time to time gave him a look, half watchful, half wistful, and sometimes made a remark, to which he gave a brief reply. His attitude and hers told a story; but it was a confused and uncertain one, of which the end was all darkness. They were together, but fortuitously, without any will of their own; and between them was a gulf fixed. Which would cross it, or was it possible that it ever could be crossed at all? The room was very silent, for the conversation was not lively between Constance and Claude on the sofa; and Sir Thomas was silent, watching too. All was so quiet, indeed, that every sound was audible without; but there was no expectation of any interruption, nobody looked for anything, there was a perfect indifference to outside sounds. So much so, that for a moment the ladies were scarcely startled by the familiar noise, so constantly heard, of Markham's hansom drawing up at the door. It could not be Markham; he was out of the way, disposed of till next morning. But Lady Markham, with that presentiment which springs up most strongly when every avenue by which harm can come seems stopped, started, then rose to her feet with alarm. 'It can't surely be—— Oh, what has brought him here!' she cried, and looked at Claude, to bid him, with her eyes, rush to meet him, stop him, keep him from coming in. But Claude did not understand her eyes.

As for Waring, seeing that something had gone wrong in the programme, but not guessing what it was, he accepted her movement as a dismissal, and quietly joined his daughter and his friend behind the screen. The two men got behind it altogether, showing only where their heads passed its line; but the light was not bright in that corner, and the new-comer was full of his own affairs. For it was Markham, who came in rapidly, stopped by no wise agent, or suggestion of expediency. He came into the room dressed in light morning-clothes, greenish, grayish, yellowish, like the colour of his sandy hair and complexion. He came in with his face puckered up and twitching, as it did when he was excited. His mother, Constance, Claude, sunk in the corner of the sofa, were all he saw; and he took no notice of Claude. He crossed that little opening amid the fashionably crowded furniture, and went and placed himself in front of the fireplace, which was full at this season of flowers, not of fire. From that point of vantage he greeted them with his usual laugh, but broken and embarrassed. 'Well, mother—well, Con; you thought you were clear of me for to-night.'

'I did not expect you, Markham. Is anything—has anything——?'

'Gone wrong?' he said. 'No—I don't know that anything has gone wrong. That depends on how you look at it. I've been in the country all day.'

'Yes, Markham; so I know.'

'But not where I was going,' he said. His laugh broke out again, quite irrelevant and inappropriate. 'I've seen Nelly,' he said.

'Markham!' his mother cried, with a tone of wonder, disapproval, indignation, such as had never been heard in her voice before, through all that had been said and understood concerning Markham and Nelly Winterbourn. She had sunk into her chair, but now rose again in distress and anxiety. 'Oh,' she cried, 'how could you? how could you? I thought you had some true feeling. O Markham, how unworthy of you *now* to vex and compromise that poor girl!'

He made no answer for a moment, but moistened his lips, with a sound that seemed like a ghost of the habitual chuckle. 'Yes,' he said, 'I know you made it all up that the chapter was closed *now*; but I never said so, mother. Nelly's where she was before, when we hadn't the courage to do anything. Only worse: shamed and put in bondage by that miserable beggar's will. And you all took it for granted that there was an end between her and me. I was waiting to marry her when she was free and rich, you all thought; but I wasn't bound, to be sure, nor the sort of man to think of it twice when I knew she would be poor.'

'Markham! no one ever said, nobody thought——'

'Oh, I know very well what people thought—and said too, for that matter,' said Markham. 'I hope a fellow like me knows Society well enough for that. A pair of old stagers like Nelly and me, of course we knew what everybody said. Well, mammy, you're mistaken this time, that's all. There's nothing to be taken for granted in this world. Nelly's game, and so am I. As soon as it's what you call decent, and the crape business done with—for she has always done her duty by him, the wretched fellow, as everybody knows——'

'Markham!' his mother cried, almost with a shriek—'why, it is ruin, destruction. I must speak to Nelly—ruin both to her and you.'

He laughed. 'Or else the t'other thing—salvation, you know. Anyhow, Nelly's game for it, and so am I.'

There suddenly glided into the light at this moment a little figure, white, rapid, noiseless, and caught Markham's arm in both hers. 'O Markham! O Markham!' cried Frances, 'I am so glad! I never believed it; I always knew it. I am so glad!' and began to cry, clinging to his arm.

Markham's puckered countenance twitched and puckered more and more. His chuckle sounded over her half like a sob. 'Look here,' he said. 'Here's the little one approves. She's the one to judge, the sort of still small voice—eh, mother? Come; I've got far better than I deserve: I've got little Fan on my side.'

Lady Markham wrung her hands with an impatience which partly arose from her own better instincts. The words which she wanted would not come to her lips. 'The child, what can she know!' she cried, and could say no more.

'Stand by me, little Fan,' said Markham, holding his sister close to him. 'Mother, it's not a small thing that could part you and me; that is what I feel, nothing else. For the rest, we'll take the Priory, Nelly and I, and be very jolly upon nothing. Mother, you didn't think in your heart that YOUR son was a base little beggar, no better than Winterbourn?'

Lady Markham made no reply. She sank down in her chair and covered her face with her hands. In the climax of so many emotions, she was overwhelmed. She could not stand up against Markham: in her husband's presence, with everything hanging in the balance, she could say nothing. The worldly wisdom she had learned melted away from her. Her heart was stirred to its depths, and the conventional bonds restrained it no more. A kind of sweet bitterness—a sense of desertion, yet hope; of secret approval, yet opposition—disabled her altogether. One or two convulsive sobs shook her frame. She was able to say nothing, nothing, and was silent, covering her face with her hands.

Waring had seen Markham come in with angry displeasure. He had listened with that keen curiosity of antagonism which is almost as warm as the interest of love, to hear what he had to say. Sir Thomas, standing by his side, threw in a word or two to explain, seeing an opportunity in this new development of affairs. But nothing was really altered until Frances rose. Her father watched her with a poignant anxiety, wonder, excitement. When she threw herself upon her brother's arm, and, all alone in her youth, gave him her approval, the effect upon the mind of her father was very strange. He frowned and turned away, then came back and looked again. His daughter, his little white spotless child, thrown upon the shoulder of the young man whom he had believed he hated, his wife's son, who had been always in his way. It was intolerable. He must spring forward, he thought, and pluck her away. But Markham's stifled cry of emotion and happiness somehow arrested Waring. He looked again, and there was something tender, pathetic, in the group. He began to perceive dimly how it was. Markham was making a resolution which, for a man of his kind, was heroic; and the little sister, the child, his own child, of his training, not of the world, had gone in her innocence and consecrated it with her approval. The approval of little Frances! And Markham had the heart to feel that in that approval there was something beyond and above everything else that could be said to him. Waring, too, like his wife, was in a condition of mind which offered no defence against the first touch of nature which was strong enough to reach him. He was open not to everyday reasoning, but to the sudden prick of a keen unhabitual feeling. A sudden impulse came upon him in this softened, excited mood. Had he paused to think, he would have turned his back upon that scene and hurried away, to be out of the contagion. But, fortunately, he did not pause to think. He went forward quickly, laying his hand upon the back of the chair in which Lady Markham sat, struggling for calm —and confronted his old antagonist, his boy-enemy of former times, who recognised him suddenly, with a gasp of astonishment. 'Markham,' he said, 'if I understand rightly, you are acting like a true and honourable man. Perhaps I have not done you justice, hitherto. Your mother does not seem able to say anything. I believe in my little girl's instinct. If it will do you any good, you have my approval too.'

Markham's slackened arm dropped to his side, though Frances embraced it still. His very jaw dropped in the amazement, almost consternation, of this sudden appearance. 'Sir,' he stammered, 'your—your—support—your—friendship would be all I could——' And here his voice failed him, and he said no more.

Then Waring went a step further by an unaccountable impulse, which afterwards he could not understand. He held out one hand, still holding with the other the back of Lady Markham's chair. 'I know what the loss will be to your mother,' he said; 'but perhaps—perhaps, if she pleases: that may be made up too.'

She removed her hands suddenly and looked up at him. There was not a particle of colour in her cheek. The hurrying of her heart parched her open lips. The two men clasped hands over her, and she saw them through a mist, for a moment side by side.

At this moment of extreme agitation and excitement, Lady Markham's butler suddenly opened the drawing-room door. He came in with that solemnity of countenance with which, in his class, it is thought proper to name all that is preliminary to death. 'If you please, my lady,' he said, 'there's a man below has come to say that the fever's come to a crisis, and that there's a change.'

'You mean Captain Gaunt,' cried Lady Markham, rising with a half-stupefied look. She was so much worn by these divers emotions, that she did not see where she went.

'Captain Gaunt!' said Constance with a low cry.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

Lady Markham was a woman, everybody knew, who never hesitated when she realised a thing to be her duty, especially in all that concerned hospitals and the sick. She appeared by George Gaunt's bedside in the middle of what seemed to him a terrible, long, endless night. It was not yet midnight, indeed; but they do not reckon by hours in the darkness through which he was drifting, through which there flashed upon his eyes confused gleams of scenes that were like scenes upon a stage all surrounded by darkness. The change had come. One of the nurses, the depressed one, thought it was for death; the other, possessed by the excitement of that great struggle, in which sometimes it appears that one human creature can visibly help another to hold the last span of soil on which human foot can stand, stood by the bed, almost carried away by what to her was like the frenzy of battle to a soldier, watching to see where she could strike a blow at the adversary, or drag the champion a hair's-breadth further on the side of victory. There appeared to him at that moment two forms floating in the air—both white, bright, with the light upon them, radiant as with some glory of their own to the gaze of fever. He remembered them afterwards as if they had floated out of the chamber, disembodied, two faces, nothing more; and then all again was night. 'He's talked a deal about his mother, poor gentleman. He'll never live to see his mother,' said the melancholy attendant, shaking her head. 'Hush,' said the other under her breath. 'Don't you know we can't tell what he hears and what he don't hear?' Lady Markham was of this opinion too. She called the doleful woman with her outside the door, and left the last battle to be fought out. Frances stood on the other side of the bed. How she came there, why she was allowed to come, neither she nor any one knew. She stood looking at him with an awe in her young soul which silenced every other feeling. Nelly Winterbourn had been afraid of death, of seeing or coming near it. But Frances was not afraid. She stood, forgetting everything, with her head thrown back, her eyes expanded, her heart dilating and swelling in her bosom. She seemed to herself to be struggling too, gasping with his efforts for breath, helping him—oh, if she could help him!—saying her simple prayers involuntarily, sometimes aloud. Over and over again, in the confusion and darkness and hurrying of the last battle, there would come to him a glimpse of that face. It floated over him, the light all concentrated in it—then rolling clouds and gloom.

It was nearly morning when the doctor came. 'Still living?'—'Alive; but that is all,' was the brief interchange outside the door. He would have been surprised, had he had any time for extraneous emotions, to see on the other side of the patient's bed, softly winnowing the air with a large fan, a girl in evening dress, pearls gleaming upon her white neck, standing rapt and half-unconscious in the midst of the unwonted scene. But the doctor had no time to be surprised. He went through his examination in that silence which sickens the very heart of the lookers-on. Then he said, briefly, 'It all depends now on the strength whether we can pull him through. The fever is gone; but he is as weak as water. Keep him in life twelve hours longer, and he'll do.'

Twelve hours!—one whole long lingering endless summer day. Lady Markham, with her own affairs at such a crisis, had not hesitated. She came in now, having got a change of dress, and sent the weary nurse, who had stood over him all night, away. Blessed be fashion, when its fads are for angels' work! Noiselessly into the room came with her, clean, fresh, and cool, everything that could restore. The morning light came softly in, the air from the open windows. Freshness and hope were in her face. She gave her daughter a look, a smile. 'He may be weak, but he has never given in,' she said. Reinforcements upon the field of battle. In a few hours, which were as a year, the hopeful nurse was back again refreshed. And thus the endless day went on. Noon, and still he lived. Markham walked about the little street with his pockets full of small moneys, buying off every costermonger or wandering street vendor of small-wares, boldly interfering with the liberty of the subject, stopping indignant cabs, and carts half paralysed with slow astonishment. It was scarcely necessary, for the patient's brain was not yet sufficiently clear to be sensitive to noises; but it was something to do for him. A whole cycle of wonder had gone round, but there was no time to think of it in the absorbing interest of this. Waring had employed his wife's son to clear off those debts, which, if the old General ever knew of them, would add stings to sorrow—which, if the young man mended, would be a crushing weight round his neck. Waring had done this without a word or look that inferred that Markham was to blame. The age of miracles had come back; but, as would happen, perhaps, if that age did come back, no one had time or thought to give to the prodigies, for the profounder interest which no wonder could equal, the fight between death and life—the sudden revelation, in common life, of all the mysteries that make humanity what it is—the love which made a little worldling triumphant over every base suggestion—the pity that carried a woman out of herself and her own complicated affairs, to stand by another woman's son in the last mortal crisis—the nature which suspended life in every one of all these differing human creatures, and half obliterated, in thought of another, the interests that were their own.

Through the dreadful night and through the endless sunshine of that day, a June day, lavish of light and pleasure, reluctant to relinquish a moment of its joy and triumph, the height of summer days, the old people, the old General and his wife, the father and mother, travelled without pause, with few words, with little hope, daring to say nothing to each other except faint questions and calculations as to when they could be there. When they could be there! They did not put the other question to each other, but, within themselves, repeated it without ceasing: Would they be there before——? Would they be there in time?—to see him once again. They scarcely breathed when the cab, blundering along, got to the entrance of a little street, where it was stopped by a wild figure in a gray overcoat, which rushed at the horse and held him back. Then the old General rose in his wrath: 'Drive on, man! drive on. Ride him down, whoever the fool is.' And then, somewhat as those faces had appeared at the sick man's bedside, there came at the cab window an ugly little face, all puckers and light, half recognised as a bringer of good tidings, half hated as an obstruction, saying: 'All right—all right. I'm here to stop noises. He's going to pull through.'

'Mamma,' said Constance next evening, when all their excitement and emotions were softened down, 'I hope you told Mrs. Gaunt that I had been there?'

'My dear, Mrs. Gaunt was not thinking of either you or me. Perhaps she might be conscious of Frances; I don't know even that. When one's child is dying, it does not matter to one who shows feeling. By and by, no doubt, she will be grateful to us all.'

'Not to me—never to me.'

'Perhaps she has no reason, Con,' her mother said.

'I am sure I cannot tell you, mamma. If he had died, of course—though even that would not have been my fault. I amused him very much for six weeks, and then he thought I behaved very badly to him. But all the time I felt sure that it would really do him no harm. I think it was cheap to buy at that price all your interest and everything that has been done for him—not to speak of the experience in life.'

Lady Markham shook her head. 'Our experiences in life are sometimes not worth the price we pay for them; and to make another pay——'

'Oh!' said Constance with a toss of her head, shaking off self-reproach and this mild answer together. 'It appears that there is some post his father wants for him to keep him at home; and Claude will move heaven and earth—that's to say the Horse Guards and all the other authorities—to get it. Mamma,' she added after a pause, 'Frances will marry him, if you don't mind.'

'Marry him!' cried Lady Markham with a shriek of alarm; 'that is what can never be.'

Meanwhile, Frances was walking back from Mrs. Gaunt's lodging, where the poor lady, all tremulous and shaken with joy and weariness, had been pouring into her sympathetic ears all the anguish of the waiting, now so happily over, and weeping over the kindness of everybody—everybody was so kind. What would have happened had not everybody been so kind? Frances had soothed her into calm, and coming down-stairs, had met Sir Thomas at the door with his inquiries. He looked a little grave, she thought, somewhat preoccupied. 'I am very glad,' he said, 'to have the chance of a talk with you, Frances. Are you going to walk? Then I will see you home.'

Frances looked up in his face with simple pleasure. She tripped along by his side like a little girl, as she was. They might have been father and daughter smiling to each other, a pretty sight as they went upon their way. But Sir Thomas's smile was grave. 'I want to speak to you on some serious subjects,' he said.

'About mamma? Oh, don't you think, Sir Thomas, it is coming all right?'

'Not about your mother. It is coming all right, thank God, better than I ever hoped. This is about myself. Frances, give me your advice. You have seen a great deal since you came to town. What with Nelly Winterbourn and poor young Gaunt, and all that has happened in your own family, you have acquired what Con calls experience in life.'

Frances' small countenance grew grave too. 'I don't think it can be true life,' she said.

He gave a little laugh, in which there was a tinge of embarrassment. 'From your experience,' he said, 'tell me: would you ever advise, Frances, a marriage between a girl like you—mind you, a good girl, that would do her duty, not in Nelly Winterbourn's way—and an elderly, rather worldly man?'

'Oh no, no, Sir Thomas,' cried the girl; and then she paused a little, and said to herself that perhaps she might have hurt Sir Thomas's feelings by so distinct an expression. She faltered a little, and added: 'It would depend, wouldn't it, upon who they were?'

'A little, perhaps,' he said. 'But I am glad I have had your first unbiassed judgment. Now for particulars. The man is not a bad old fellow, and would take care of her. He is rich, and would provide for her—not like that hound Winterbourn. Oh, you need not make that gesture, my dear, as if money meant nothing; for it means a great deal. And the girl is as good a little thing as ever was born. Society has got talking about it; it has been spread abroad everywhere; and perhaps if it comes to nothing, it may do her harm. Now, with those further lights, let me have your deliverance. And remember, it is very serious—not play at all.'

'I have not enough lights, Sir Thomas. Does she,' said Frances, with a slight hesitation—'love him? And does he love her?'

'He is very fond of her; I'll say that for him,' said Sir Thomas hurriedly. 'Not perhaps in the boy and-girl way. And she—well, if you put me to it, I think she likes him, Frances. They are as friendly as possible together. She would go to him, I believe, with any of her little difficulties. And he has as much faith in her—as much faith as in—— I can't put a limit to his faith in her,' he said.

Frances looked up at him with the grave judicial look into which she had been forming her soft face. 'All you say, Sir Thomas, looks like a father and child. I would do that to papa—or to you.'

Here he burst, to her astonishment, into a great fit of laughter, not without a little tremor, as of some other feeling in it. 'You are a little Daniel,' he said. 'That's quite conclusive, my dear. Oh, wise young judge, how I do honour thee!'

'But——' Frances cried, a little bewildered. Then she added: 'Well, you may laugh at me if you like. Of course, I am no judge; but if the gentleman is so like her father, cannot she be quite happy in being fond of him, instead of——? Oh no! Marrying is quite different—quite, *quite* different. I feel sure she would think so, if you were to ask her, herself,' she said.

'And what about the poor old man?'

'You did not say he was a poor old man; you said he was elderly, which means——'

'About my age.'

'That is not an old man. And worldly—which is not like you. I think, if he is what you say, that he would like better to keep his friend; because people can be friends, Sir Thomas, don't you think, though one is young and one is old?'

'Certainly, Frances—witness you and me.'

She took his arm affectionately of her own accord and gave it a little kind pressure. 'That is just what I was thinking,' she said, with the pleasantest smile in the world.

Sir Thomas took Lady Markham aside in the evening and repeated this conversation. 'I don't know who can have put such an absurd rumour about,' he said.

'Nor I,' said Lady Markham; 'but there are rumours about every one. It is not worth while taking any notice of them.'

'But if I had thought Frances would have liked it, I should never have hesitated a moment.'

'She might not what you call like it,' said Lady Markham, dubiously; 'and yet she might——'

'Be talked into it, for her good? I wonder,' said Sir Thomas, with spirit, 'whether my old friend, who has always been a model woman in my eyes, thinks that would be very creditable to me?'

Lady Markham gave a little conscious guilty laugh, and then, oddly enough, which was so unlike her—twenty-four hours in a sick-room is trying to any one—began to cry. 'You flatter me with reproaches,' she said. 'Markham asks me if I expect *my* son to be base; and you ask me how I can be so base myself, being your model woman. I am not a model woman; I am only a woman of the world, that has been trying to do my best for my own. And look there,' she said, drying her eyes; 'I have succeeded very well with Con. She will be quite happy in her way.'

'And now,' said Sir Thomas after a pause, 'dear friend, who are still my model woman, how about your own affairs?'

She blushed celestial rosy red, as if she had been a girl. 'Oh,' she said, 'I am going down with Edward to Hilborough to see what it wants to make it habitable. If it is not too damp, and we can get it put in order—I am quite up in the sanitary part of it, you know—he means to send the Gaunts there with their son to recruit, when he is well enough. I am so glad to be able to do something for his old neighbours. And then we shall have time ourselves, before the season is over, to settle what we shall do.'

The reader is far too knowing in such matters not to be able to divine how the marriages followed each other in the Waring family within the course of that year. Young Gaunt, when he got better, confused with his illness, soothed by the weakness of his convalescence and all the tender cares about him, came at last to believe that the debts which had driven him out of his senses had been nothing but a bad dream. He consulted Markham about them, detailing his broken recollections. Markham replied with a perfectly opaque countenance: 'You must have been dreaming, old man. Nightmares take that form the same as another. Never heard half a word from any side about it; and you know those fellows, if you owed them sixpence and didn't pay, would publish it in every club in London. It has been a bad dream. But look here,' he added; 'don't you ever go in for that sort of thing again. Your head won't stand it. I'm going to set you the example,' he said, with his laugh. 'Never—if I should live to be a hundred,' Gaunt cried with fervour. The sensation of this extraordinary escape, which he could not understand, the relief of having nothing to confess to the General, nothing to bring tears from his mother's eyes, affected him like a miraculous interposition of God, which no doubt it was, though he never knew how. There was another vision which belonged to the time of his illness, but which was less apocryphal, as it turned out—the vision of those two forms through the mist—of one, all white, with pearls on the milky throat, which had been somehow accompanied in his mind with a private comment that at last, false Duessa being gone for ever, the true Una had come to him. After a while, in the greenness of Hilborough, amid the cool shade, he learned to fathom how that was.

But were we to enter into all the processes by which Lady Markham changed from the 'That can never be!' of her first light on the subject, to giving a reluctant consent to Frances' marriage, we should require another volume. It may be enough to say that in afterdays, Captain Gaunt—but he was then Colonel—thought Constance a very handsome woman, yet could not understand how any one in his senses could consider the wife of Claude Ramsay worthy of a moment's comparison with his own. 'Handsome, yes, no doubt,' he would say; 'and so is Nelly Markham, for that matter,—but of the earth, earthy, or of the world, worldly; whereas Frances——'

Words failed to express the difference, which was one with which words had nothing to do.

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